DOUBLE ISSUE

MARCH 1995

ELLERY QUEEN®

THE WORLD'S LEADING

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

54TH ANNIVERSARY

Michael Gilbert
Ruth Rendell
Steven Saylor

PLUS 15 OTHERS

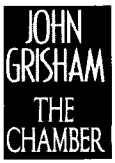
$3.95 U.S./$4.95 CAN.

03

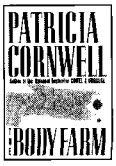
0 38716 36006 4

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Get away with MURDER (6 books for 99¢ with membership)



2113 $24.95/**$12.98**

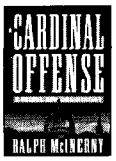


0950* $23.00/**$10.98**

0737* $24.00/**$10.98**

1206 $19.95/**$9.98**

It's *easy* to make a killing with *Mystery Guild*®. First, slip the sharpest scissors out of the drawer. Then, ever so quietly, cut out the coupon below. Finish it off with a pen (caution: do *not* use invisible ink). Tonight, you can start slashing as much as *60% off* publishers' edition prices. Become a partner in crime with *Mystery Guild*!



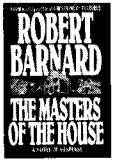
0752 $21.95/**$9.98**

1032 $18.95/**$9.98**

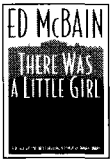
0992 $22.00/**$10.98**

1263 $19.95/**$9.98**

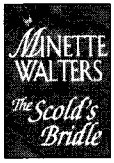
1289 $18.95/**$9.98**



1214 $20.00/**$9.98**



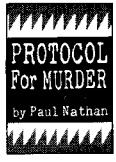
1156 $21.95/**$9.98**



1297 $21.95/**$10.98**

0729 $22.00/**$11.98**

0430 $22.00/**$9.98**



1248 $22.00/**$9.98**

HERE'S WHAT YOU GET WHEN YOU JOIN...

A GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION. Once your membership's accepted, we'll send the 6 BOOKS you've chosen plus your FREE CLUB TOTE. If you're dissatisfied with the books, return them within 10 days *at our expense.* Membership will be canceled and you'll owe nothing.

HUGE DISCOUNTS ON HARDCOVER BOOKS. Save as much as 60% off publishers' edition prices. Club books are sometimes altered in size to fit special presses.

THE FREE CLUB MAGAZINE. You'll receive up to 16 issues a year. Each reviews the Featured Book Selections plus dozens of alternate books.

SHOPPING MADE SIMPLE. To get the Featured Book Selections, *do nothing*—they will be sent automatically. If you prefer another book—or none at all—return your Member Reply Form by the specified date. A shipping and handling charge (and sales tax, where applicable) is added to each order.

AN EASY-TO-MEET OBLIGATION. Take up to 2 years to buy 4 more books at regular low Club prices. Afterwards, you may resign membership anytime.

RISK-FREE RETURN PRIVILEGES. If you get an unwanted book because your Club magazine was delayed and you had less than 10 days to respond, simply return the book *at our expense.*

* Explicit scenes and/or language.

Prices in fine print are for publishers' editions.

Prices in bold print are for Club hardcover editions.

FREE TOTE
with membership

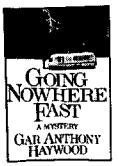
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Contents

The Taker of Hints	Jeffry Scott	4
Little Caesar and the Pirates	Steven Saylor	16
The Last Rendezvous	Joan Richter	48
The Jury Box	Jon L. Breen	70
My First Murder	H. R. F. Keating	74
The Watchers	Jo Bannister	84
Death Takes the Veil	Monica Quill	90
Breaking and Exiting	William G. Tapply	118
The Butcher of Seville	Edward D. Hoch	126
Talked Out of It	Barbara Callahan	142
Floater	William Beechcroft	164
Grinding the Ghost	Clayton Emery	178
The Walking Stick	Michael Luth	197
Unacceptable Levels	Ruth Rendell	211

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

1222* $23.00/$13.98



1057 $19.95/$8.98

1040 $21.50/$9.98

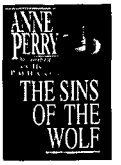
1008 $19.95/$8.98

1024 $19.95/$9.98

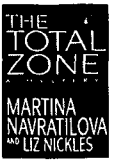
0745* $23.00/$12.98

0984 $20.00/$9.98

0661 $21.00/$9.98



0687 $21.95/$9.98



0646 $21.00/$9.98

0265* $21.95/$9.98

0521 $21.95/$9.98

0547 $19.95/$8.98

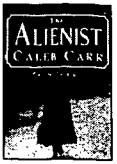
0497 $19.95/$9.98

7401 $22.95/$11.98

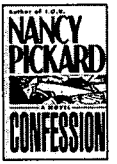
0158 $18.95/$9.98

0026 $18.95/$9.98

6437 $19.95/$9.98

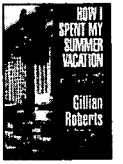


0463* $22.00/$13.98



0356 $20.00/$9.98

0786 $19.95/$9.98



0794 $20.00/$9.98

0703* $22.95/$10.98

6460 $19.95/$9.98

MYSTERY GUILD

MAIL TO: *Mystery Guild*
6550 East 30th Street
P.O. Box 6362
Indianapolis, IN 46206-6362

Please write book numbers here:

YES! *Please enroll me in Mystery Guild according to the risk-free membership plan described in this ad. Send me the 6 BOOKS I've indicated—plus my FREE CLUB TOTE. Bill me just 99¢, plus shipping and handling.*

SAVE EVEN MORE! Send me this book now and reduce my commitment to 3 books. Bill me an added $3.49, plus shipping and handling.

(write book number)

58514 78

Mr./Mrs. _____
Miss/Ms. _____
(please print)

Address _____ Apt. _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

58513 79

Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members serviced from Canada, where offer is slightly different. Sales tax added where applicable. We reserve the right to reject any application.

EQM 3/95

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Mystery Crossword	Beth Allison	**214**
Mandeville and The Staple	Terry Mullins	**216**
Prey Don't Tell	Jere Hoar	**226**
The Big Empty	Judith Post	**235**
A Meeting at the Cafe Visconti	Janice Law	**251**
The Mathematics of Murder	Michael Gilbert	**264**

Cover Illustration by Tom Herbert

Dell Magazines, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036
Note: indicia on page 285

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a ***NEW*** **short story by**

JEFFRY SCOTT

As a foreign correspondent for the Daily Mail, *Jeffry Scott traveled widely and reported some of the most dramatic stories of the day, including the Jonestown cult mass-suicides in Guyana. In his fiction, however, he mostly stays close to home and shows as fine a sense as anyone of the possibilities for crime in the domestic niche . . .*

THE TAKER OF HINTS

by JEFFRY SCOTT

The only diverting, smile-inducing thing about her—not that she had ever seen humour in it—was her name. That apart, Esme Huddle was quiet, practical, sardonic; unfrivolous enough to be mistaken for dour.

She and men did not agree. It wasn't a violent dislike on either side, but Esme and males had never quite hit it off. She was prepared to concede being the loser by that, since most women seemed to value a partnership of some kind, but there you were.

Courted in her youth, Esme had tended to lose patience with suitors' posturing and moodiness. Fellows talked such a lot, half or more of it rubbish.

In turn, Archie and Gerald and Tim turned moody when she refused to let them "take liberties"—and they had struck her as amiable enough, initially. If they were the cream of the crop, it did not bode well for the rest, but still she wed Peter Huddle. Mainly because he was docile, promisingly terse, and kept asking her. Esme didn't like marriage much, asking herself why romantic novelists made such a fuss about the whole thing. Once her curiosity was satisfied, sex seemed messy and repetitive. After certain patient

© 1995 by Jeffry Scott.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

years Mr. Huddle came to share her opinion, visiting his mother for the weekend and never returning. Their divorce was painless.

Esme kept the house in Chinnery Gardens, buying her ex-husband's half by monthly installments. While her job as technical librarian with an engineering company was not particularly well paid, she spent little on clothes, less on cosmetics, and never took holidays. The wolf was far from the door.

Her parents died, as elderly folk will. Esme got their house and her father's business, so the wolf retired to the horizon. So too did Esme, though only from the technical library to Chinnery Gardens.

Her father's off-license shop, selling beer, wines, and spirits to take away, was not in the best trading neighbourhood but it would get no worse. Esme interviewed the manager, whom her father had recruited the previous year, listening patiently before setting him straight.

"You'll take money at my expense unless I sack you and run this place myself, and I don't want to do that. No, let me finish. Salesmen bribe you and I dare say you know somebody who knows somebody who supplies stock that's fallen off the back of a lorry, and the profit on that is all yours. Then there's playing tunes on the cash register." Esme suspected that the register was his golden goose, if only because he had enthused over it being state of the art, and uncheatable.

"I've never been talked to this way," he faltered.

Restraining an impulse to point out that there is always a first time, she said, "We'll take that as read and get on quicker." Esme wrote a figure on a piece of paper and passed it to him.

"That's the minimum I want each and every week. Anything over is yours. If it's less for more than two weeks running, out you go. Mr. Goodbody looks after my tax business, he will be in touch, all your paperwork goes to him. He catches you out, it's your funeral. Good afternoon."

Between the shop income—the manager's fail-safe total was revised upwards periodically, in line with the economy—and capital gained from selling her parents' house, Esme Huddle was comfortably off.

Thanks to inflation and rising taxation, a little less so by the time she was fifty, however. If she did not buy much or often, she purchased the best: good furniture, good ingredients for simple meals cooked twice a day, a good audio system costing nearly as much as a modest family car. The exterior of her house had to be painted

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

every three years; Peter Huddle had scoffed at her insistence on this but Esme didn't care. You just had to have that done, standing over workmen to ensure that they burnt the old paint off instead of slapping more over the previous stuff—else something dreadful would happen.

There came a time when she began to recognise telltale envelopes. Esme neither allowed their mere arrival to spoil breakfast nor postponed opening them. That wasn't her style. But bank and building society statements earned her farsighted concern. It wasn't a crisis, not even a problem yet. It never would be, were she prepared to sell the house and retrench to a studio flat. All the same . . .

At that stage a solution presented itself. Esme attended a midweek gathering of the Civic Society, enjoying a slides-illustrated talk on Georgian buildings, rare as unicorns in her outer-London suburb. It was such a nice afternoon that she took the long way home, glancing idly into the shops along Normandy Parade. Then she retraced her steps. The newsagent displayed handwritten advertisements in a corner of his window.

"LODGINGS FOR SINGLE WOMAN, £70 P.W." "ROOM, BUSINESS LADY ONLY, £75 P.W." "CLEAN, NEAT (underlined) NONSMOKING (underlined twice) LODGER INVITED, TWO MINS STATION AND BUSES, TERMS BY AGREEMENT." "THIRD WOMAN FOR SMALL BUT LOVELY HOUSE, SALON-GRADE HAIR DRYER AND SATELLITE TV, £250 PER MONTH." Esme raised her eyebrows and—she retained a shred of the tomboy—whistled softly.

Her house had three bedrooms. By rearranging furniture and selling one bed, she could produce a bedroom and a private sitting room. Priced at . . . no call to be greedy, say £85 a week, throw in cooked breakfast and high tea. Fiver a week discount for cash, then accountant Goodbody and the Inland Revenue need not bother their heads over the matter. Some four thousand pounds a year, off the books, untaxed. It bore thinking about.

Her lodger must not be female: They could be worse than men under your roof—more territorial, given to hatching grievances, chattering, and she could envisage clammy tights left to dry in the bathroom. Esme's paying guest would be a man.

Actually she wouldn't mind a bit of company. In moderation, on her terms. Men might be, indeed were, men, but a lodger seemed different. More manageable; neutered, somehow.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

David Shale could have been created by order for Esme Huddle.

Not timid, she couldn't abide wishy-washy men, and not the other way; she had no time for those who were overbearing or aspired to be. Mr. Shale, fortyish, sandyish, plumply unthreatening as the dormouse which his round, liquid eyes evoked, satisfied her. He was a bookkeeper at a plastics factory only a mile from Chinnery Gardens, and proved almost embarrassingly grateful to get "my own little corner in such a nice, quiet house—parlour to myself, right across the landing. I *have* struck lucky."

That gave Esme pause. In her experience, or rather, received knowledge from her dad, and he'd been no fool, effusive strangers had to be watched. But it was just David Shale's way, he could not help being appreciative.

Further, although Esme believed that no man could be sensitive, Mr. Shale was quick on the uptake, receptive to hints. The second evening, finishing tea, he cleared his throat, showed signs of confiding in her, and began, "I'm divorced, you know—"

"I expect so," she countered sharply, forbiddingly. Changing tack to say that it had smelled of a frost on his way home, he never revived the subject. Really, Esme congratulated herself, apart from the cooking, which she would have done for herself in any case, he was no trouble. Yet she did have a minor reservation about the paying guest.

For someone avowedly admiring a nice quiet house, his voice eroded the quietness a fraction more than Esme liked. But then, she admitted smugly, she brought that on herself. She was a good cook, a good *plain* cook. Roast and three veg (she soon invited him to share Saturday and Sunday lunches, at no extra charge), egg-and-bacon breakfasts, unless it was two boiled eggs, toast, and marmalade. Variations on meat pasty, a chop, fish of some sort, for his tea. Mr. Shale couldn't get over it. "Delicious!" most times, before and after the repast. Sometimes he chortled, "Ledicious," which, since he wasn't drunk, Esme took to be a joke. She wasn't good at jokes.

How he rang the changes, lauding the most pedestrian menus. . . . Uncalled for, she considered; he was getting what she made for herself. It didn't cost that much more than catering for one.

"Scrumptious." "My goodness, a *bloater*. We had these at home, haven't seen one in years, hadn't *thought* of them. With bread and butter, just the ticket!" He might have been espying caviar.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Compliments to the chef." "After a spread like that, you must let me help with the washing-up." And so forth and on, all of it patently sincere.

Because he was biddable, a hint-taker, Esme allowed a routine to develop after tea. They'd go into the front room and watch television; they both enjoyed a quiz or a game show, sharing gleeful scorn over the number of ignoramuses and ninnies getting the chance to win absurdly rich prizes. After the nine o'clock news, Esme would say, "I expect you want some time to yourself now," and Mr. Shale would respond, "Absolutely," or "Right you are, I am a bit drowsy," and patter away, taking the used cups to the kitchen. She always made coffee for them, proper coffee, Blue Mountain, freshly ground.

After a time he needed no cue, simply collected the crockery and said goodnight.

Esme came to think so highly of him that she would have done his washing. But Mr. Shale took himself off to the laundrette every Saturday morning, choosing his library books while underpants and socks swirled around, and collecting the week's supply of shirts from a Chinese laundry. Changed his shirt daily, grubby or not. That had been one of Dad's yardsticks for a gentleman.

She kept telling herself that it was too good to last. Mr. Shale would unveil or develop new tiresome if not repellent mannerisms, take to drink, or start some hobby—men did—involving hammering and banging, strange smells, Things Left About Downstairs.

Failing that, he might mumble about a hitch at the bank, that infernal computer, and get behind with the rent. Instead, after a year, he said, "Er, about what I'm paying you, Mrs. Huddle . . . " making her bristle. "All the extra, coffee and that, and you feed me like a lord. I don't feel right. Let's round it up to the hundred."

Astonished, Esme decreed almost gaily, "We shall split the difference, Mr. Shale, and make it ninety."

The only oddity about him was that Mr. Shale never went anywhere, save work and to town on a Saturday. If friends or family existed, he never visited them and they never called on him. Esme never felt sorry for people, their remedies were in their own hands, yet she experienced a wisp of compassion for David Shale. Silly of her, she conceded. He was well looked after, and contented with small talk and television, reading, and his albums and tweezers—there was a hobby after all: he collected stamps.

Esme shrugged off her concern. She didn't have much of a life, outsiders would say, yet it suited her perfectly, thank you. Some

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

folk were self-sufficient and her lodger was one of them. She couldn't deny that being self-sufficient without being wholly alone was . . . quite pleasant.

Mr. Shale had been with her for two years when the rot set in. In rapid succession he bought a new suit, a pair of unsuitable slacks—floppy, pastel, too young for him—and a yellow tank top, worn over a silly open-neck shirt. She caught him studying himself in mirrors. He failed to understand (men didn't, for some reason) that growing sideburns drew attention to scanty growth above them.

And he started staying out at night.

Esme Huddle snorted, recognising the signs. A typical man was behaving typically. Pity, for she had nearly accepted him as a companion—not a friend, God forbid, but a human pet requiring just about the same effort and attention as a pedigreed cat.

Neither of them alluded to his conduct, nor acknowledged that a cozy routine had altered. Mr. Shale was implicitly sheepish, somehow, that was all. Diffidently hangdog, despite an occasional unguarded grin while daydreaming. "Makes me feel like his mother," Esme thought crossly. "As if I cared what he gets up to providing he doesn't bring his tart back here."

Unlikely, for David Shale was always home by ten-thirty, conspicuously alone, closer to sulks than his former cheeriness.

Although she didn't care, *as such,* Esme assured herself, it was regrettable. "Drat the chap," she exclaimed one evening. From habit she had ground enough beans for two cups. Sooner than waste the coffee she must drink the lot and be kept awake half the night. No consideration, some people.

It wasn't as if, she argued for the hundredth time, the wretched man was getting anything out of it. Apart from You Know What, silly devil. Grins or no, he was prevailing downcast lately. Hadn't touched his stamp album in weeks. She'd had to dust it this morning. And that pitiful array of vitamin pills in his bedside drawer, along with a pamphlet about hair restorers. Twenty pounds for a bottle no bigger than your thumb—and she bet he had sent away for some. Chump!

"It won't happen again," Mr. Shale assured his landlady. He eyed her anxiously.

"I'm not your keeper," Esme snapped. "Got your key, and you're a grown man."

"But I *was* very late, I must have woken you."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No must about it, if I'm abed before eleven then I get my eight hours, elephants stampeding wouldn't wake me," she lied. And with hardly a pause, "Same old story, all over you when they want your order, but it soon changes."

He looked so taken aback, even frightened, that she clicked her tongue in annoyance at his slowness. "These eggs are a disgrace. Supposed to be free-range, and you can hardly tell the yolk from the white. Stick a bit of straw in the carton and they think they can get away with anything. I shall give that fellow a piece of my mind."

"I'm not hungry, Mrs. Huddle." He grimaced at the double egg cup. "Thanks, all the same. And late, I'm running late for the office." Mr. Shale bolted.

There was no end to men's folly and vanity. Dieting now, as if skirt-chasing was not enough. And from the sickly look and other evidence, suffering a morning-after penalty for wasting his money in pubs. She had heard him come in, all right. Tiptoeing about downstairs, floorboards creaking, in and out of the bathroom, cistern growling and swooshing into the small hours. Being sick, she deduced, dirty beast. Nobody would be washing themselves, or clothing, in the handbasin so late and so repeatedly. At least he had locked the front door behind him, saving her going down to do it: She'd listened for the sound of the key.

As for it not happening again, handsome is as handsome does, and so much for men's promises. That very evening, unprecedentedly, he did not return until past eight o'clock; cod in batter, homemade batter, too, none of your shop-bought rubbish, not to mention the peas and carrots, all ruined. . . .

"I'm really sorry," he said listlessly, a "please don't start on me" note in the apology. "I got kept at, at—" The stammer was a fresh development. "—At work. All seen to now. I hope." The last was to himself.

He was a terrible colour. "I—I think I have a migraine, better turn in early." Migraine out of a bottle, she jeered silently as he fled.

Next evening she let him get his coat off, change into slippers, wash his hands. (Turning the hall broom cupboard into a downstairs cloakroom had been a worthwhile investment, Esme reminded herself, nearly worth the cost.)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm in the lounge," she called, for Mr. Shale was making towards the dining room, by training. Breakfast in the kitchen, the dining room for high tea, Esme Huddle knew how to maintain standards.

"The police were here," she greeted him. "Never had them in the house, then two at once. Plainclothesman—well, I say plain clothes, he was got up like they used to for student rag weeks, with his leather jacket and tennis shoes. Him and a girl PC. That uniform isn't becoming, she did look dowdy."

"They came here," he repeated, final word a squeak. And he looked around, radiating dread.

"No," said Esme, "this was before lunchtime, why would they wait? Wanted to know where you were on Wednesday night. Here, I said, same as usual. Tea, you watched the quiz with me, some silly comedy show afterwards while we were chatting. Then upstairs to play with your stamps. Your light went out about half-past ten, I noticed that when I went to the bathroom."

David Shale studied her curiously, lips parted. She sighed impatiently. "That's what you told them, I expect."

Still digesting what he had heard, Mr. Shale dithered.

His, "Er, yes, that's what I told them," was belated, followed with, "I should have mentioned it, I'm sorry. That's why I was late yesterday, the police asking me questions. There was a murder, and I must be somebody's double—"

Esme raised a hand. "There's enough murder on television and in the papers without talking about it." She was airing a pet grumble.

Stumbling on regardless, he mumbled, "Not murder, it was . . . accidental." Mr. Shale contrived a motionless shiver, implied by his troubled eyes. "Accident, definitely," he whispered.

Some people wouldn't listen—what had she just told him about discussing such matters? Raising her voice, Esme rapped, "I dare say."

And a shade less harshly, immediately breaking her own ban: "What do these women expect, carrying on that way. Promiscuous, the sergeant fellow said. Married woman, and a string of fancy men? I should just about think she *was* promiscuous."

David Shale seemed to shrink within himself. Esme smiled grimly. "They didn't tell you that, what sort she was? A sensible man wouldn't need telling. Touch tar and you dirty your fingers. There's a lot of truth in old sayings."

Flinching, he asked almost inaudibly, "What now?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"A nice bloater, it's fish night. *Answer or Bust* starts in twenty minutes, we must look sharp."

"No! I mean . . ." He broke off to smile wryly, bitterly, at his own stupidity. "Money, you'll be wanting more money."

Esme Huddle's ears sang and she willed herself to breathe steadily, riding out a surge of anger. Her voice shook. "I'm going to pretend you didn't say that."

She stood up. "But since we're speaking plainly—I would stay in of an evening in future, if I were you. All this nonsense when you took to going out. . . . Didn't do you a scrap of good, not in the long run. There is television and your stamps, you haven't done your stamps for ages. And three library books, weeks overdue. I keep seeing them upstairs. Thoughtless; sorry to be personal, but it is—others may be waiting for what you can't be bothered with."

Esme wanted to laugh at his expression, guarded blankness succeeded by hope, giving way to incredulous gratitude. She experienced a complex pang of half-irritated toleration—men!—and covert amusement at his transparency.

"You're right," said a fervent Mr. Shale. He moved to the other room in an awkward, experimental fashion, like a far older man or an invalid. "I must catch up on my reading. Absolutely right, as usual, Mrs. Huddle."

Adding, with a wan trace of his former, hand-rubbing zeal, "I do believe I could eat something. A bloater is a bloater is a bloater, eh?"

Which reminded her . . . She might as well get everything settled before they returned to safe ground; there would never be a better time to impose her will. "There is just one thing, Mr. Shale."

His face registered defeat settling once more. "I thought there might be."

Esme's lips tightened. Trust a man to get sarky just because his meal wasn't ready the minute he walked in. But she kept her voice reasonable. "I wish you wouldn't make such a to-do about what I put on the table. Nobody ever said I wasn't a fair cook, for anything plain and wholesome. There's no need for comments, 'Thank you' would do, though I take that for granted. It gets on my nerves a bit, frankly. I know you don't intend to, but it does."

There, she had said what she wanted to. If he didn't like it, he could lump it.

Mr. Shale said wonderingly, "Praising your cooking too much. That's it?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I can't think of anything else. It probably seems trivial, but we can't help the way we are. 'Over-egging the pudding,' my father called that kind of thing. It's only plain cooking when all is said and done, and you pay me for it."

"Good God," Mr. Shale mouthed dazedly. He struggled for further words, thought better of them, and nodded humbly.

Time would tell, she reflected. A few days later she gave the still-subdued lodger a little test when he sat down to tea, warning briskly, "Mind out, your plate's very hot."

Back turned while she reached through the serving hatch for salt and pepper, Esme waited for his once-inevitable rejoinder: "Well, it came from a hot plate, Mrs. Huddle." But waiting politely for her to sit down before taking up his knife and fork, Mr. Shale spoke not a word.

She felt no sense of victory, though she was gratified to find her character assessment justified. Whatever David Shale had done to that bad woman, he would always behave himself under her roof, not to mention her eye. And he was an undeniably quick learner.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We're looking for people

"Writing for children is the perfect way to begin," says the author of 53 children's books. "Your ideas come right out of your own experience. And while it's still a challenge, it's the straightest possible line between you and publication —if you're qualified to seek the success this rewarding field offers."

By Alvin Tresselt, *Dean of Faculty*

IF you want to write and get published, I can't think of a better way to do it than writing books and stories for children and teenagers. Ideas flow naturally, right out of your own life experience. While it's still a challenge, the odds of getting that first, unforgettable check from a juvenile publisher are better than they are from just about any other kind of publisher I know.

Later on, you may get checks from other publishers. But right now, the object is to begin—to break into print—to learn the feeling of writing and selling your work and seeing your name in type. After that, you can decide if you want your writing to take another direction.

But after 40 years of editing, publishing, and teaching—and 53 books of my own—I can tell you this: You'll go a long way before you discover anything as rewarding as writing for young readers.

The soaring children's market

Your words will never sound as sweet as they do from the lips of a child reading your books and stories. And the joy of creating books and stories that reach young people is an experience you won't find anywhere else. But that's not all. The financial rewards go far beyond most people's expectations, because there's a huge market out there for writers who are trained to tap it. Over $1.5 *billion* worth of children's books are purchased annually—some 4,000 different titles—many by new authors.

And more than 560 children's magazines rely on freelancers to fill each issue.

Yet two big questions bedevil nearly every would-be writer: "Am I really qualified?" and "How can I get started?"

Alvin Tresselt's 53 books for young readers have sold more than 2,000,000 copies.

"Am I really qualified?"

This is our definition of a "qualified person": It's someone with an aptitude for writing who can take constructive criticism, learn from it, and turn it into a professional performance. That's the only kind of student we're looking for at the Institute of Children's Literature® The reasons are simple: Our reputation is built on success, and if prospective students don't have the aptitude, we probably can't help them. And we tell them so. It's only fair to both of us.

To help us spot potential authors, we've developed a revealing test for writing aptitude. It's free, and we don't charge for our evaluation. But no one gets into the Institute without passing it. Those who pass receive our promise:

You will complete at least one manuscript ready to submit to a publisher by the time you finish our course

One-on-one training with your own instructor

I've learned a lot about writing for children and I love it. Now I'm passing my knowledge on to my students so they can profit from it. When I'm not writing my own books I spend my time at the Institute, a workshop for writers that does one thing and does it better than any other educational institution I know of: It trains qualified people to write for the young reader.

This is the way I work with my students, and my fellow instructors—all of whom are experienced writers or editors—work more or less the same way.

When you're ready—at your own time

Writing for Children and Teenagers is recommended for college credits by the Connecticut Board for State Academic Awards.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to write children's books"

and your own pace—you send your assignment to me and I read it and I reread it to get everything out of it you've put into it. Then I edit your assignment with a well tempered pencil, just the way a publishing house editor would—if he or she had the time. I return it, along with a detailed letter explaining my comments. I tell you what your strong points are, what your weaknesses are, and just what you can do to improve. It's a matter of push and pull with each assignment. You push and I pull, and between us both, you learn to write.

The home of the Institute of Children's Literature, founded in 1969.

The proof of the pudding

This method really works. I wouldn't spend five minutes at it if it didn't. The proof of the pudding is that many students break into print even before they finish the course.

Connie Wooldridge, Philipsburg, PA, who has sold two stories to *Highlights for Children*, says, "As an at-home mother of four, I have so appreciated the way the Institute is set up: it has provided me with the professional contact and guidance I needed to get a serious start as a writer, without the hassles of babysitters, long drives, and hard deadlines."

"—finally...the support and direction I needed."

"The letter with the return of my first assignment was so kind and encouraging I started to cry," writes E.D. Mahr, Hinsdale, IL. "Here, finally, was the support and direction I needed."

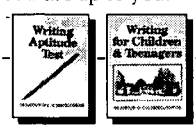
Ken Fleming, Staten Island, NY, who reports a sale to *Cricket* Magazine says, "To know that more than 120,000 children will be reading my words gives me a feeling of great satisfaction. Thank you all for giving me so much for so little."

To find qualified men and women with an aptitude for writing, we have prepared an intriguing aptitude test. It is offered free and will be professionally evaluated at no cost to you by our staff.

Free Writing Aptitude Test

Just mail the coupon below to receive your free test and 32-page illustrated brochure describing our course, *Writing for Children and Teenagers,* and the current market for children's literature. If you demonstrate a true aptitude for writing, you will be eligible to enroll. But that's up to you.

There is no obligation.



Get both FREE

Institute of Children's Literature
93 Long Ridge Road
West Redding, CT 06896-0812

Yes, I'm interested in *Writing for Children and Teenagers.* Please send me your free Writing Aptitude Test and 32-page brochure. I understand I am under no obligation whatever, and no salesman will visit me.

Please circle one and print name clearly:

Mr. Mrs. Ms. Miss **B3241**

Name

Street

City

State Zip

Founded in 1969 • APPROVED BY THE CONNECTICUT COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION

The testimonials in this ad were provided voluntarily, without remuneration, by the Institute's students, from 1985 to 1994.

COPYRIGHT © ICI, 1995, A DIVISION OF THE INSTITUTE, INC.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a *NEW* Gordianus story by

STEVEN SAYLOR

The eight published short stories in Steven Saylor's Gordianus series, all set in the period between the Roman civil wars, fill in the temporal gap between the first two Gordianus novels, Roman Blood *(which begins in 79 B.C.) and* Arms of Nemesis *(72 B.C.). Mr. Saylor plans eventually to use short stories to cover other periods skipped over as he continues Gordianus's adventures in his novels. His current offering remains in the period between the wars, when Julius Caesar was a young man. Readers who would like a look ahead in time might try the latest Gordianus novel,* The Venus Throw *(St. Martin's Press).*

LITTLE CAESAR AND THE PIRATES

by STEVEN SAYLOR

"Well met, Gordianus! Tell me, have you heard what they're saying down in the Forum about Marius's young nephew, Gaius Julius Caesar?"

It was my good friend Lucius Claudius who called to me on the steps of the Senian Baths. He appeared to be on his way out, while I was on my way in.

"If you mean that old story about his playing queen to King Nicomedes while he was in Bythinia, I've heard it all before—from you, I believe, more than once, and with increasingly graphic details each time."

"No, no, that bit of gossip is ancient history now. I'm talking about this tale of pirates, ransom, revenge—*crucifixions!*"

I looked at him blankly.

Lucius grinned, which caused his two chins to meld into one. His chubby cheeks were pink from the heat of the baths and his frazzled

© 1995 by Steven Saylor.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

orange curls were still damp. The twinkle in his eyes held that special joy of being the first to relate an especially juicy bit of gossip.

I confessed to him that my curiosity was piqued. However, as it appeared that Lucius was leaving the baths, while I had only just arrived, and as I was especially looking forward to the hot plunge, given the night nip that lingered in the spring air—alas, the story would have to wait.

"What, and let someone else tell it to you, and get the details all confused? I think not, Gordianus! No, I'll accompany you." He gestured to his entourage to turn around. The dresser, the barber, the manicurist, the masseur, and the bodyguards all looked a bit confused but followed us compliantly back into the baths.

This turned out to be a stroke of luck for me, as I was in need of a bit of pampering. Bethesda did her best at cutting my hair, and as a masseuse her touch was golden, but Lucius Claudius was wealthy enough to afford the very best in body servants. There is something to be said for having occasional access to the services of a rich man's slaves. As my fingernails and toenails were carefully clipped and filed and buffed, my hair expertly trimmed, and my beard painlessly shorn, Lucius kept trying to begin his tale and I kept putting him off, wanting to make sure I received the full treatment.

It was not until our second visit to the hot plunge that I allowed him to begin in earnest. Amid clouds of steam, with our heads bobbing on the water like little islands in the mist, he related his nautical tale.

"As you know, Gordianus, in recent years the problem of piracy has grown increasingly severe."

"Blame it on Sulla and Marius and the civil war," I said. "Wars mean refugees, and refugees mean more bandits on the highways and more pirates on the sea."

"Yes, well, whatever the cause, we all see the results. Ships seized and looted, cities sacked, Roman citizens taken hostage."

"While the senate vacillates, as usual."

"What can they do? Would you have them grant a special naval command to some power-mad general, who can then use the forces we give him to attack his political rivals and set off another civil war?"

I shook my head. "Trapped between warlords and brigands, with the Roman senate to lead us—sometimes I despair for our republic."

"As do all thinking men," agreed Lucius. We shared a moment of silent contemplation on the crisis of the Roman republic, then he eagerly launched into his tale again.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Anyway, when I say that the pirates have grown so bold as to kidnap Roman citizens, I don't simply mean some merchant they happened to pluck from a trading vessel. I mean citizens of distinction, noble Romans whom even ignorant pirates should know better than to molest. I mean young Gaius Julius Caesar himself."

"When was this?"

"Just as winter was setting in. Caesar had spent the summer on the island of Rhodes, studying rhetoric under Apollonius Molo. He was due to serve as an attaché to the governor of Cilicia, but he lingered on Rhodes as long as he could, and set out at the very close of the sailing season. Just off the island of Pharmacusa his ship was given chase and captured by pirates. Caesar and his whole entourage were taken prisoner!"

Lucius raised an eyebrow, which prompted a curious pattern of wrinkles across his fleshy brow. "Now keep in mind that Caesar is only twenty-two, which may explain how he could be so recklessly bold. Remember also that his good looks, wealth, and connections have pretty much always gotten him whatever he wants. Imagine, he finds himself in the clutches of Cilician pirates, the most bloodthirsty people on earth. Does he cringe beneath their threats? Bow his head? Make himself humble and meek? Far from it. Exactly the opposite! He taunted his captors from the very beginning. They told him they were planning to demand a ransom of half a million sesterces. Caesar laughed in their faces! For a captive such as himself, he told them, they were fools not to demand at least a million—which they did!"

"Interesting," I said. "By placing a greater value on his life, he forced the pirates to do likewise. I suppose even bloodthirsty killers tend to take better care of a million-sesterce hostage than one worth only half as much."

"So you think the gambit shows Caesar's cleverness? His enemies ascribe it to simple vanity. But I give him full credit for what he did next, which was to arrange for the release of almost everyone else in his party. His numerous secretaries and assistants were let go because Caesar insisted that the ransom of a million sesterces would have to be raised from various sources in various places, requiring the labor of his whole entourage. The only ones he kept with him were two slaves—that being the absolute minimum to see to a nobleman's comfort—and his personal physician, whom Caesar can hardly do without because of his bouts of falling sickness.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, they say Caesar spent nearly forty days in the pirates' clutches, and treated his captivity as if it were a vacation. If he had a mind to take a nap and the pirates were making too much noise, he would send out one of his slaves to tell them to shut up! When the pirates engaged in exercises and games, Caesar joined them, and as often as not bested them, treating them as if they were not his captors but his guards. To fill his idle time he wrote speeches and composed verses, such as he had learned to do under Apollonius Molo, and when he finished a work he would make the pirates sit quietly and listen to him. If they interrupted him or made critical remarks, he called them barbarians and illiterates to their faces. He made jokes about having them whipped, as if they were unruly children, and even joked about having them put to death on the cross for insulting the dignity of a Roman patrician."

"The pirates put up with such behavior?"

"They seemed to adore it! Caesar exercised a kind of fascination over them, by sheer power of his will. The more he abused and insulted them, the more they were charmed.

"At last, the ransom arrived, and Caesar was released. Right away he headed for Miletus, took charge of some ships, and went straight back to the island where the pirates were stationed. He took them by surprise, captured most of them, and not only reclaimed the ransom money but took the pirates' hoard as well, claiming it as the spoils of battle. When the local governor hesitated over deciding the pirates' fate, trying to think of some legal loophole whereby he could claim the booty for his treasury, Caesar took it upon himself to tend to the pirates' punishment. Many times while he was their captive he boasted that he would see them crucified, and they had laughed, thinking the threat was merely a boy's bravado—but in the end it was Caesar who laughed, when he saw them nailed naked upon crosses. 'Let men learn to take me at my word,' he said."

I shivered, despite the heat of the bath. "You heard this in the Forum, Lucius?"

"Yes, it's on everyone's lips. Caesar is on his way back to Rome, and the story of his exploits precedes him."

"Just the sort of moral tale that Romans love to hear!" I grunted. "No doubt the ambitious young patrician plans a career in politics. This is the very thing to build up his reputation with the voters."

"Well, Caesar needs something to recover his dignity, after having given it up to King Nicomedes," said Lucius with a leer.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes, in the eyes of the mob, nothing enhances a Roman's dignity like having another man nailed to a cross," I said glumly.

"And nothing more diminishes his dignity than being nailed himself, even by a king," observed Lucius.

"This water grows too hot; it makes me irritable. I think I could use the services of your masseur now, Lucius Claudius."

The tale of Caesar and the pirates proved to be immensely popular. Over the next few months, as spring warmed to summer, I heard it repeated by many tongues in many variations, in taverns and on street corners, by philosophers in the Forum and by acrobats outside the Circus Maximus. It was a clear example of how terribly out of hand the problem of piracy had gotten, men said, nodding gravely, but what really impressed them was the idea of a brash young patrician charming a crew of bloodthirsty pirates with his haughtiness and in the end inflicting upon them the full measure of Roman justice.

It was on a sweltering midsummer day in the month of Sextilis that I was called to the home of a patrician named Quintus Fabius.

The house was situated on the Aventine Hill. The structure looked at once ancient and immaculately kept—a sign that its owners had prospered there for many generations. The foyer was lined with scores of wax effigies of the household ancestors; the Fabii go all the way back to the founding of the republic.

I was shown to a room off the central courtyard, where my hosts awaited me. Quintus Fabius was a man of middle age with a stern jaw and graying temples. His wife Valeria was a strikingly beautiful woman with hazel hair and blue eyes. They sat on backless chairs, each attended by a slave with a fan. A chair was brought in for me, along with a slave to fan me.

Usually, I find that the higher a client ranks on the social scale, the longer he takes to explain his business. Quintus Fabius, however, lost no time in producing a document. "What do you make of it?" he said, as yet another slave conveyed the scrap of papyrus to my hands.

"You *can* read, can't you?" asked Valeria, her tone more anxious than insulting.

"Oh yes—if I go slowly," I said, thinking to buy more time to study the letter (for a letter it was) and to figure out what the couple wanted from me. The papyrus was water-stained and roughly torn

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at the edges and had been folded several times, rather than rolled. The handwriting was childish but strong, with gratuitous flourishes on some of the letters.

> To Pater and to Mater dearest:
>
> By now my friends must have told you of my abduction. It was foolish of me to go off swimming by myself—forgive me! I know that you must be stricken with fear and grief, but do not fret overmuch; I have lost only a little weight and my captors are not too cruel.
>
> I write to convey their demands. They say you must give them 100,000 sesterces. This is to be delivered to a man in Ostia on the morning of the ides of Sextilis, at a tavern called The Flying Fish. Have your agent wear a red tunic.
>
> From their accents and their brutish manner I suspect these pirates are Cilicians. It may be that some of them can read (though I doubt it), so I cannot be completely frank, but know that I am in no greater discomfort than might be expected.
>
> Soon we shall be reunited! That is the fervent prayer of your devoted son,
>
> Spurius.

While I pondered the note, from the corner of my eye I saw that Quintus Fabius was drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair. His wife anxiously fidgeted and tapped her long fingernails against her lips.

"I suppose," I finally said, "that you would like me to go ransom the boy."

"Oh yes!" said Valeria, leaning forward and fixing me with a fretful gaze.

"He's not a boy," said Quintus Fabius, his voice surprisingly harsh. "He's seventeen, and put on his manly toga a year ago."

"But you will accept the job?" said Valeria.

I pretended to study the letter again. "Why not send someone from your own household? A trusted secretary, perhaps?"

Quintus Fabius scrutinized me. "I'm told that you're rather clever. You find things out."

"It hardly requires someone clever to deliver a ransom."

"Who knows what unexpected contingencies may arise in such a situation? I'm told that I can trust your judgment . . . and your discretion."

"Poor Spurius!" said Valeria, her voice breaking. "You've read his letter. You must see how badly he's being treated."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He makes light of his tribulations," I said.

"He would! If you knew my son, how cheerful he is by nature, you'd realize just how desperate his situation must be for him, even to mention his suffering. If he says he's lost a little weight, he must be half-starved. What can such men be feeding him—fish heads and moldy bread? If he says these monsters are 'not too cruel,' imagine how cruel they must be! When I think of his ordeal—oh, I can hardly bear it!" She stifled a sob.

"Where was he kidnapped, and when?"

"It happened last month," said Quintus Fabius.

"Twenty-two days ago," said Valeria with a sniffle. "Twenty-two endless days and nights!"

"He was down at Baiae with some of his friends," explained Quintus Fabius. "We have a summer villa above the beach, and a town house across the bay at Neapolis. Spurius and his friends took a little skiff and went out among the fishing boats. The day was hot. Spurius decided to take a swim. His friends stayed on the boat."

"Spurius is a strong swimmer," said Valeria, her pride steadying the tremor in her voice.

Quintus Fabius shrugged. "My son is better at swimming than at most things. While his friends watched, he made a circuit, swimming from one fishing boat to another. His friends saw him talking and laughing with the fishermen."

"Spurius is very outgoing," his mother explained.

"He swam farther and farther away," Quintus Fabius continued, "until his friends lost sight of him for a while and began to worry. Then one of them saw Spurius on board what they had all thought to be a fishing vessel, though it was larger than the rest. It took them a moment to realize that the vessel had set sail and was departing. The boys tried to follow in the skiff, but none of them has any real skill at sailing. Before they knew it, the boat had disappeared, and Spurius with it. Eventually the boys returned to the villa at Baiae. They all thought that Spurius would turn up sooner or later, but he never did. Days passed without a word."

"Imagine our worry!" said Valeria. "We sent frantic messages to our foreman at the villa. He made inquiries of fishermen all around the bay, trying to find anyone who could explain what had happened and identify the men who had sailed off with Spurius, but his investigations led nowhere."

Quintus Fabius sneered. "The fishermen around Neapolis—well, if you've ever been down there you know the sort. Descendants of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the old Greek colonists who've never given up their Greek ways. Some of them don't speak Latin! As for their personal habits and vices, the less said the better. Such people can hardly be expected to cooperate with finding a young Roman patrician abducted by pirates."

"On the contrary," I said, "I should think that fishermen would be the natural enemies of pirates, whatever their personal prejudices against the patrician class."

"However that may be, my man down in Baiae was unable to discover anything," said Quintus Fabius. "We had no definite knowledge of what had become of Spurius until we received his letter a few days ago."

I looked at the letter again. "Your son calls the pirates Cilicians. That seems rather far-fetched to me."

"Why?" said Valeria. "Everyone says they're the most bloodthirsty people on earth. One hears about them making raids everywhere along the coasts, from Asia all the way to Africa and Spain."

"True, but here, on the coast of Italy? And in the waters around Baiae?"

"It's shocking news, I'll agree," said Quintus Fabius. "But what can you expect with the problem of piracy getting worse and worse while the Senate does nothing?"

I pursed my lips. "And it doesn't seem odd to you that these pirates want the ransom brought to Ostia, just down the Tiber from Rome? That's awfully close."

"Who cares about such details?" said Valeria, her voice breaking. "Who cares if we have to go all the way to the Pillars of Hercules, or just a few steps to the Forum? We must go wherever they wish, to get Spurius safely home."

I nodded. "What about the amount? The ides is only two days away. A hundred thousand sesterces amounts to ten thousand gold pieces. Can you raise that sum?"

Quintus Fabius snorted. "The money is no problem. The amount is almost an insult. Though I have to wonder if the boy is worth even that price," he added under his breath.

Valeria glared at him. "I shall pretend that I never heard you say such a thing, Quintus. And in front of an outsider!" She glanced at me and quickly lowered her eyes.

Quintus Fabius ignored her. "Well, Gordianus, will you take the job?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I stared at the letter, feeling uneasy. Quintus Fabius bridled at my hesitation. "If it's a matter of payment, I assure you I can be generous."

"Payment is always an issue," I acknowledged, though considering the yawning gulf in my household coffers and the mood of my creditors, I was in no position to decline. "Will I be acting alone?"

"Of course. Naturally, I intend to send along a company of armed men—"

I raised my hand. "Just as I feared. No, Quintus Fabius, absolutely not. If you entertain a fantasy of taking your son alive by using force, I urge you to forget it. For the boy's safety as well as my own, I cannot allow it."

"Gordianus, I *will* send armed men to Ostia."

"Very well, but they'll go without me."

He took a deep breath and stared at me balefully. "What would you have me do, then? After the ransom is paid and my son released, is there to be no force at hand with which to capture these pirates?"

"Is capturing them your intent?"

"It's one use for armed men."

I bit my lip and slowly shook my head.

"I was warned that you were a bargainer," he growled. "Very well, consider this: If you successfully arrange the release of my son, and afterwards my men are able to retrieve the ransom, I shall reward you with one-twentieth of what they recover, over and above your fee."

The jangling coins rang like sweet music in my imagination. I cleared my throat and calculated in my head. One-twentieth of 100,000 sesterces was 5,000 sesterces, or 500 gold pieces. I said the figure aloud to be sure there was no misunderstanding. Quintus Fabius slowly nodded.

Five hundred pieces of gold would pay my debts, repair the roof on my house, buy a new slave to be my bodyguard (a necessity I had been without for some time), and give me something left over.

On the other hand, there was a bad smell about the whole affair.

In the end, for a generous fee plus the prospect of five hundred pieces of gold, I decided I could hold my nose.

Before I left the house I asked if there was a picture of the kidnapped boy that I could see. Quintus Fabius withdrew, leaving me in his wife's charge. Valeria wiped her eyes and managed a weak smile as she showed me into another room.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"A woman artist named Iaia painted the family last year, when we were down at Baiae on holiday." She smiled, obviously proud of the likenesses. The group portrait was done in encaustic wax on wood. Quintus Fabius stood on the left, looking stern. Valeria smiled sweetly on the right. Between them was a strikingly handsome hazel-haired young man with lively blue eyes who was unmistakably her son. The portrait stopped at his shoulders but showed that he was wearing a manly toga.

"The portrait was done to celebrate your son's coming of age?"

"Yes."

"Almost as beautiful as his mother," I said, stating the matter as fact, not flattery.

"People often remark at the resemblance."

"I suppose he might have a bit of his father about the mouth."

She shook her head. "Spurius and my husband are not related by blood."

"No?"

"My first husband died in the civil war. When Quintus married me, he adopted Spurius and made him his heir."

"Are there any children in the household?"

"Only Spurius. Quintus wanted more children, but it never happened." She shrugged uneasily. "But he loves Spurius as he would his own flesh, I'm sure of it, though he doesn't always show it. It's true they've had their differences, but what father and son don't? Always fighting about money! Spurius can be extravagant, I'll admit, and the Fabii are famous for stinginess. But the harsh words you heard him utter earlier—pay them no attention. This terrible ordeal has put us both on edge."

Valeria turned back to the portrait of her son and smiled sadly, her lips trembling. "My little Caesar!" she whispered.

"Caesar?"

"Oh, you know who I mean—Marius's nephew, the one who was captured by pirates last winter and got away. Oh, Spurius loved hearing that story! Young Caesar became his idol. Whenever he saw him in the Forum he would come home all breathless and say, 'Mater, do you know who I saw today?' I would laugh, knowing it could only be Caesar, to make him so excited." Her lips trembled. "And now, by some jest of the gods, Spurius himself has been captured by pirates—well, that's why I call him my little Caesar, knowing how brave he must be, and pray for the best."

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I left the next day for Ostia, accompanied by the armed force that Quintus Fabius had hired and outfitted for the occasion. The band was made up of army veterans and freed gladiators, men with no prospects who were willing to kill or risk being killed for a modest wage. There were fifty of us in all, jammed together in a narrow boat sailing down the Tiber. The men took turns rowing, sang old army songs, and bragged about their exploits on the battlefield or in the arena. If one were to believe all their boasting, taken together they had slaughtered the equivalent of several cities the size of Rome.

Their leader was an old Sullan centurion named Marcus, who had an ugly scar that ran from his right cheekbone down to his chin, cutting through both lips. Perhaps the old wound made it painful for him to speak; he could hardly have been more tight-lipped. When I tried to discover what sort of orders Quintus Fabius had given him, Marcus made it clear at once that I would learn no more and no less than he cared to tell me, which for the moment was nothing.

I was an outsider among these men. They looked away when I passed. Whenever I did manage to engage one of them in conversation, the man quickly found something more important to do and in short order I found myself talking to empty air.

But there was one among their number who took a liking to me. His name was Belbo. To some degree he was ostracized by the others as well, for he was not a free man but a slave owned by Quintus Fabius; he had been sent along to fill out the ranks on account of his great size and strength. A previous owner had trained him as a gladiator, but Quintus Fabius used him in his stables. The hair on Belbo's head was like straw, while the hair on his chin and chest was a mixture of red and yellow. He was by far the largest man in the company. The others joked that if he moved too quickly from one side of the boat to the other he was likely to capsize it.

I expected that nothing would come of questioning him, but soon discovered that Belbo knew more than I thought. He confirmed that young Spurius was not on the best of terms with his father. "There's always been a grudge between them. The mistress loves the boy, and the boy loves his mother, but the master has a hard spot for Spurius. Which is odd, because the boy is actually more like his father in most ways, even if he is adopted."

"Really? He looks just like his mother."

"Yes, and sounds and moves like her, too, but that's all a kind of mask, if you ask me, like warm sunlight sparkling on cold water.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Underneath, he's as stern as the master, and just as willful. Ask any of the slaves who've made the mistake of displeasing him."

"Perhaps that's the trouble between them," I suggested, "that they're too much alike, and vie for the attentions of the same woman."

We reached Ostia, where the boat was moored on a short pier that jutted into the Tiber. Farther down the riverfront, at the end of the docks, I could just glimpse the open sea. Gulls circled overhead. The smell of saltwater scented the breeze. The strongest of the men unloaded the chests containing the ten thousand pieces of gold and loaded them onto a wagon which was wheeled into a warehouse on the docks. About half the men were sent to stand guard over it.

I expected the rest of the men to head for the nearest tavern, but Marcus kept order and made them stay on the boat. Their celebration would come the next day, after the ransom and whatever else resulted.

As for me, I intended to seek lodgings at The Flying Fish, the tavern mentioned in Spurius's letter. I told Marcus I wanted to take Belbo with me.

"No. The slave stays here," he said.

"I need him for a bodyguard."

"Quintus Fabius said nothing about that. You mustn't attract attention."

"I'll be more conspicuous *without* a bodyguard."

Marcus considered this for a moment, then agreed. "Good," someone called as Belbo stepped onto the dock, "the giant takes up the room of three men!"

At this Belbo laughed good-naturedly, perceiving no insult.

I found The Flying Fish on the seaside waterfront where the larger seafaring vessels pitched anchor. The building had a tavern with a stable attached on the ground floor, and tiny cubicles for rent on the second floor. I took a room, treated myself and Belbo to a delicious meal of stewed fish and mussels, then took a long walk around the town to reacquaint myself with the streets. It had been awhile since I'd spent any time in Ostia.

As the sun sank beneath the waves, setting the horizon aflame, I rested on the waterfront, making idle conversation with Belbo and looking at the various small ships along the dock and the larger ones moored farther out in the deeper water. Most were trading vessels and fishing boats, but among them was a warship painted crimson and bristling with oars. The enormous bronze ram's head

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at its prow glittered blood-red in the slanting sunlight.

Belbo and I passed a skin of watered wine back and forth, which kept his tongue loose. Eventually I asked him what orders his master had given to the centurion Marcus regarding the armed company.

His answer was blunt. "We're to kill the pirates."

"As simple as that?"

"Well, we're not to kill the boy in the process, of course. But the pirates are not to escape alive if we can help it."

"You're not to capture them for sentencing by a Roman magistrate?"

"No. We're supposed to kill them on the spot, every one of them."

I nodded gravely. "Can you do that, Belbo, if you have to?"

"Kill a man?" He shrugged. "I'm not like some of the others on the boat. I haven't killed hundreds and hundreds of men."

"I suspect most of the men on the boat were exaggerating."

"Really? Still, I wasn't a gladiator for long. I didn't kill all that many men."

"No?"

"No. Only—" He wrinkled his brow, calculating. "Only twenty or thirty."

The next morning I rose early and put on a red tunic, as the ransom letter had specified. Before I went downstairs to the tavern I told Belbo to find a place in front of the building where he could watch the entrance. "If I leave, follow me, but keep your distance. Do you think you can do that without being noticed?"

He nodded. I looked at his straw-colored hair and his enormous torso and was dubious.

As the day warmed, the tavern keeper rolled up the screens, which opened the room to the fresh air and sunlight. The waterfront grew busy. I sat patiently just inside the tavern and watched the sailors and merchants passing by. Some distance away, Belbo had found a discreet, shady spot to keep watch, leaning against a little shed. The bovine expression on his face and the fact that he seemed hardly able to keep his eyes open made him look like an idler eluding his master for as long as he could and trying to steal a few moments of sleep. The deception was either remarkably convincing, or else Belbo was as stupid as he looked.

I didn't have long to wait. A young man who looked hardly old enough to have grown his beard stepped into the tavern and blinked

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at the sudden dimness, then saw my tunic and approached me.

"Who sent you?" he asked. His accent sounded Greek to me, not Cilician.

"Quintus Fabius."

He nodded, then studied me for a moment while I studied him. His long black hair and shaggy beard framed a lean face that was accustomed to sun and wind. There was a hint of wildness in his wide green eyes. There were no scars visible on his face or his darkly tanned limbs, as one might expect to see on a battle-hardened pirate. Nor did he have the look of desperation or cruelty common to such men.

"My name is Gordianus," I said. "And what shall I call you?"

He seemed surprised at being asked for a name, then finally said, "Cleon," in a tone that suggested he would have given a false name but couldn't think of one. The name was Greek, like his features.

I looked at him dubiously. "We're here for the same purpose, are we not?"

"For the ransom," he said, lowering his voice. "Where is it?"

"Where is the boy?"

"He's perfectly safe."

"I'll have to be sure of that."

He nodded. "I can take you to him now, if you wish."

"I do."

"Follow me."

We left the tavern and walked along the waterfront for a while, then turned onto a narrow street that ran between two rows of warehouses. Cleon walked quickly and began to turn abruptly at each intersection, changing our course and sometimes doubling back the way we had come. I kept expecting to walk into Belbo, but he was nowhere to be seen. Either he was unexpectedly skilled at secret pursuit, or else we had eluded him.

We drew alongside a wagon, the bed of which was covered with a heavy sailcloth. Looking around nervously, Cleon shoved me toward the wagon and told me to crawl under the cloth. The driver of the wagon set the horses into motion. From where I was lying I could see nothing. The wagon took so many turns that I lost count and finally gave up on trying to track our direction.

The wagon at last came to a stop. Hinges creaked. The wagon pulled forward a bit. Doors slammed shut. Even before the cloth was thrown back, I knew from the smells of hay and dung that we must be in a stable. I could smell the sea as well; we had not gone

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

too far inland. I sat up and looked around. The tall space was lit by only a few stray beams of sunlight which entered through knotholes in the walls. I glanced toward the driver, who turned his face away.

Cleon gripped my arm. "You wanted to see the boy."

I stepped down from the wagon and followed him. We stopped before one of the stalls. At our approach a figure in a dark tunic rose from the hay. Even in the dim light I recognized him from his portrait. In the flesh young Spurius looked even more like Valeria, but where her skin had been milky white, his was deeply browned by the sun, which caused his eyes and teeth to sparkle like alabaster, and while his mother had worn an expression of anxious melancholy, Spurius looked sarcastically amused. In the portrait he had shown some babyfat which could stand melting away; he was leaner now, and it suited him. As for suffering, he did not have the haunted look of a youth who had been tortured. He looked like a young man who had been on an extended holiday. His manner, however, was businesslike.

"What took you so long?" he snapped.

Cleon looked at him sheepishly and shrugged. If the boy meant to imitate Caesar's bravado, perhaps he had succeeded.

Spurius looked at me skeptically. "Who are you?"

"My name is Gordianus. Your father sent me to ransom you."

"Did he come himself?"

I hesitated. "No," I finally said, nodding cautiously toward the pirate and trying to communicate to Spurius that in the presence of his captors we should discuss no more details than were necessary.

"You brought the ransom?"

"It's waiting elsewhere. I wanted to have a look at you first."

"Good. Well, hand the money over to these barbarians and get me out of here. I'm bored to death of consorting with rabble. I'm ready to get back to Rome and some good conversation, not to mention some decent cooking!" He crossed his arms. "Well, go on! The pirates are all around us, just out of sight; don't doubt that they'll gladly kill us both if you give them any excuse. Bloodthirsty beasts! You've seen I'm alive and well. Once they have the ransom, they'll let me go. So, off with you both. Hurry up!"

I returned to the wagon. Cleon covered me with the cloth. I heard the stable door open. The wagon began to roll. Again we turned and turned, until at last the vehicle came to a stop. Cleon pulled back the cloth. I rubbed my eyes at the sudden brightness and stepped

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

onto the street. We were back where we had started, on the sea front only a short distance from The Flying Fish.

As we walked toward the tavern my heart fell to see Belbo in the very spot where I had last seen him, leaning against the shed across from the tavern—with his mouth slightly open and his eyes shut! Was it possible that he hadn't followed us at all, but had dozed through the whole episode, standing upright?

"I'll leave you now," said Cleon. "Where shall I collect the ransom?"

I described to him the location of the warehouse on the Tiber. He would bring his wagon and some men to carry off the gold. I would go with them, alone, and when they were safely away they would deliver Spurius into my custody.

"What assurance do I have that the boy will be released? Or for that matter, that I'll be released?"

"It's the ransom we want, not you, and not . . . the boy." His voice broke oddly. "In an hour's time, then!" He turned and vanished into the crowd.

I waited for a moment, then spun around, intending to march up to Belbo and at the very least kick his shins. Instead I collided headlong with a large, immovable object—Belbo himself. As I tumbled backwards Belbo caught me and righted me, picking me up as if I were a child.

"I thought you were asleep!" I said.

He laughed. "Pretty good at playing dead, aren't I? That trick saved my life in the arena once. The other gladiator thought I'd fainted from fear. The fool put his foot on my chest and smiled up at his patron—and the next minute he was tasting dirt and had my sword at his throat!"

"Fascinating. Well, did you follow us or not?"

Belbo hung his head. "I followed, yes. But I lost you early on."

"Did you see when I got into the wagon?"

"No."

"Numa's balls! Then we have no idea where the boy is being kept. There's nothing to do but wait for Cleon to come for the ransom." I stared at the uncaring sea and the wheeling gulls above our heads. "Tell me, Belbo, why do the circumstances of his kidnapping have such an odd smell?"

"Do they?"

"I smell something fishy."

"We *are* on the waterfront," said Belbo.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I clapped my hands. "A ray of light descends from the heavens to pierce the fog!"

He stared at the clear sky above and wrinkled his brow.

"I mean, Belbo, that I suddenly perceive the truth . . . I think." But I still had a very, very bad feeling about the situation.

"Do you understand? It's absolutely essential that you and your men make no attempt to follow when Cleon carts off the gold."

The centurion Marcus looked at me skeptically. "And you with it! What's to keep you from running off with these pirates—and the gold?"

"Quintus Fabius entrusted me with handling the ransom. That should be enough for you."

"And he entrusted me with certain instructions as well." Marcus crossed his brawny arms, bristling with black and gray hairs.

"Look here, Marcus. I think I know these men's intentions. If I'm right, the boy is perfectly safe—"

Marcus snorted. "Ha! Honor among pirates!"

"Perfectly safe," I continued, "as long as the ransom proceeds exactly as they wish. And also, if I'm right, you'll be able to retrieve the ransom easily enough *afterwards*. If you attempt to follow, or foil the transaction as it happens, then it's you who'll be putting the boy's life at risk, along with my own."

Marcus chewed his cheeks and wrinkled his nose.

"If you don't do as I ask," I went on, "and something happens to the boy, consider how Quintus Fabius will react. Well? Cleon and his men will be here any moment. What do you say?"

Marcus muttered what I took to be his assent, then turned as one of his gladiators trotted up to us. "Four men and a wagon, sir, coming this way!"

Marcus raised his arm. His men disappeared into the shadows of the warehouse. There was a tap on my shoulder.

"What about me?" asked Belbo. "Shall I try to follow again, like I did this morning?"

I shook my head and looked nervously at the open door of the warehouse.

"But you'll be in danger. A man needs a bodyguard. Make them take both of us."

"Hush, Belbo! Go hide with the others. Now!" I pushed him with both hands and realized I would probably have better luck pushing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

over a yew tree. At last he gave way and lumbered off looking unhappy.

A moment later Cleon appeared at the open door, followed by the wagon with its driver and two other young men. Like Cleon, they looked Greek to me.

I showed him to the chests of gold and opened the lid of each one in turn. Even in the dim light, the glitter seemed to dazzle him. He grinned and looked a little embarrassed. "So much! I wondered what it would look like, but I couldn't picture it. I kept trying to imagine ten thousand golden minnows. . . ."

He shook his head as if to clear it and set to work with his companions loading the heavy chests into the wagon. A group of bloodthirsty pirates might be expected to dance a gleeful jig at the proximity of so much booty, but they went about their work in a somber, almost fretful manner.

The labor done, Cleon wiped a trickle of sweat from his brow and indicated a long, narrow space between the trunks in the bed of the wagon. "Room enough for you to lie down, I think." He looked uneasily into the shadows of the warehouse and raised his voice. "And I'll say it again: No one had better follow us. We have watchers posted along the way. They'll know if anyone comes after us. If anything happens to arouse our suspicions, anything at all, I can't be responsible for the outcome. Understood?" He posed the question to the empty air as much as to me.

"Understood," I said. As I stepped into the wagon I gripped his forearm to steady myself and spoke in his ear so the others couldn't hear. "Cleon, you wouldn't really hurt the boy, would you?"

He gave me a strangely plaintive look, like a man long misunderstood who suddenly finds a sympathetic ear. Then he hardened his face and swallowed. "He won't be hurt, as long as nothing goes wrong," he said hoarsely. I settled myself in the gap between the trunks. The sailcloth was thrown over the wagon bed. The wagon lurched into motion, moving ponderously under its heavy load.

From this point, I thought, there was no reason for anything to go wrong with the ransoming. Marcus had agreed not to follow. Cleon had the gold. Soon I would have Spurius. Even if my assumption about the kidnapping was wrong, there would be no reason for his captors to harm the boy or myself; our deaths could profit them nothing. As long as nothing went wrong . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Perhaps it was the cramped, suffocating darkness that set my thoughts spinning into the awful void. I had taken Marcus's muttering as an agreement to postpone his pursuit, but had I read him rightly? His men might be following us even now, clumsily showing themselves, alerting the watchers and sending them into a panic. Someone would cry out, there would be an assault on the wagon, swords would clash and clang! A blade would rip through the sailcloth, heading straight for my heart—

The fantasy seemed so real that I gave a jerk as if waking from a nightmare. But my eyes were wide open.

I took a breath to steady myself, but found my thoughts spinning even more recklessly out of control. What if I had completely misjudged Cleon? What if his soulful green eyes and uncertain manner were a crafty deception, a deliberate disguise for a hardened killer? The petulant, beautiful boy I had seen that morning might already be dead, his bravado cut short along with his throat. The wagon would return to the stable where they had murdered him, and as soon as the pirates were sure that no one had followed, they would pull me from the wagon, stuff a gag into my mouth, tie me up like a rolled carpet, and lug me off to their ship, laughing raucously and dancing the jig they had suppressed while they loaded their booty. Cilician pirates, the cruelest men ever born! I would be taken off to sea, kicking and screaming into my gag. By the light of the moon they would set my clothes afire and use me for a torch, and when they were tired of hearing me scream they would toss me overboard. I could almost smell the stench of my own burning flesh, hear the hiss of the flames expiring as the hard water burst open and then slapped shut above me, taste the stinging salt in my nostrils. What would be left after the fishes made a feast of me?

In the cramped space I managed to wipe my sweaty forehead on a bit of the red tunic. Such morbid fantasies were nonsense, I told myself. I had to trust my own judgment, and my judgment decreed that Cleon was not the sort of fellow who could murder anyone, at least not in cold blood. Not even Roscius the actor could mime such innocence. A strange sort of pirate, indeed!

Then a new fear struck me, more chilling than all the rest. Belbo had said that Quintus Fabius wanted the pirates to be slaughtered. *We're not to kill the boy in the process, of course*—but was he only inferring this? He could hardly be expected to know every secret order that his master had given to Marcus. Spurius was not of his own blood; Quintus Fabius spoke of him with contempt. What if he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

actually wanted the boy dead? He had sent the ransom, yes, but he could hardly have refused to do that, if only to placate Valeria and to save face in public. But if in the end the boy were to be murdered by the pirates, or if it could be made to look that way . . .

It was even possible that Quintus Fabius himself had arranged to have his son kidnapped—a clever way to get rid of Spurius without drawing suspicion to himself. The idea was monstrous, but I had known men devious enough to concoct such a scheme. But if that was the case, why had he engaged my services? To demonstrate his conscientious concern by calling in an outsider, perhaps. To prove to Valeria and the rest of the world that he was quite serious about rescuing his kidnapped son. In which case, part of his plan for getting rid of Spurius would have to include the unfortunate death of the Finder sent to handle the tragically botched ransom. . . .

The journey seemed to go on forever. The road became rockier and rougher. The wagon rattled and lurched. My extravagant fantasies of death and destruction suddenly paled beside the imminent danger of being crushed if one of the heavy trunks should be pitched onto me. By Hercules, the wagon bed was hot! By the time the wheels ground to a halt, my tunic was soaked as if I had taken a dip in the sea.

The sailcloth was thrown back. I was chilled by a salty breeze.

I had expected that we would return to the stable where I had seen Spurius. Instead, we were on a strip of sandy beach beneath low hills somewhere outside the city. The tiny cove terminated in boulders at both ends. A small relay boat was drawn up in the shallows. A larger vessel was anchored out in the deeper water. I sprang from the wagon, glad to breathe fresh air again.

Cleon and his three companions began to hurriedly move the trunks from the wagon into the relay boat. "Damned heavy!" grunted one of them. "We'll never be able to move it all in one trip. It'll take two, at least two—"

"Where's the boy?" I demanded, grabbing Cleon's arm.

"Here I am."

I turned and saw Spurius approaching from a group of sheltering boulders at the end of the beach. In the heat of the day he had stripped off his tunic and was wearing only a loincloth. It was all he usually wore, if he wore even that; his lean torso and long limbs were deeply and evenly bronzed by the sun.

I looked at Cleon. His brows were drawn together as if he had pricked his finger. He stared at the boy and swallowed hard.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's about time!" Spurius crossed his arms and glared at me. Petulance made him even more beautiful.

"Perhaps you'd like to put on your tunic," I suggested, "and we'll be on our way. If you'll point the way to Ostia, Cleon, we'll begin walking. Unless you intend to leave us the wagon?"

Cleon stood by dumbly. Spurius stepped between us and drew me aside. "Did anyone follow the wagon?" he whispered.

"I don't think so."

"Are you certain?"

"I can't be absolutely certain." I glanced at Cleon, who appeared not to be listening. The little relay boat was heading out to the larger ship with its first load, riding low in the water under the weight of the gold.

"Well, did Pater send along a troop of armed guards or not? Answer me!" Spurius spoke to me as if I were a slave.

"Young man," I said sternly, "my duty at this moment is to your mother and father—"

"My father!" Spurius wrinkled his nose and spat out the word as if it were an expletive.

"My job is to see that you get home alive. Until we're safely back in Ostia, keep your mouth shut."

He was shocked into silence for a moment, then gave me a withering look. "Well, anyway," he said, raising his voice, "there's no way these fellows will release me until all the gold is loaded onto the ship. Correct, Cleon?"

"What? Oh, yes," said Cleon. The sea breeze whipped his long black hair about his face. He blinked back tears, as if the salt stung his eyes.

Spurius gripped my arm and led me farther away. "Now listen," he growled, "did that miserly pater of mine send along an armed force or not? Or did he send you alone?"

"I've already asked you to keep quiet—"

"And I'm ordering you to give me an answer. Unless you want me to make a very unsatisfactory report about you to my parents."

Why did Spurius insist on knowing? And why now? It seemed to me that my suspicions about the kidnapping were confirmed.

If there were no armed force, then Spurius might as well stay with his so-called captors, if only to stay close to the gold, or his portion of it. Perhaps his father could be had for a second ransom. But if an armed force was waiting to act, then it would be best for him to be "rescued" by me now, to allow the fishermen—for surely

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

these Neapolitan Greeks were anything but pirates—to make their escape immediately, along with the gold.

"Let's suppose there is an armed force," I said. "In that case, your friends had better get out of here at once. Let's suppose they get clean away. How will you get your share of the gold then?"

He stared at me blankly, then flashed such a charming smile that I could almost understand why Cleon was so hopelessly smitten with the boy. "It's not as if I don't know where they live, down on the bay. They wouldn't dare try to cheat me. I could always denounce them and have every one of them crucified. They'll keep my share safe for me until I'm ready to claim it."

"What sort of bargain did you strike with them? Nine-tenths of the gold for you, one-tenth for them?"

He smiled, as if caught at doing something wicked but clever. "Not quite that generous, actually."

"How did you find these 'pirates'?"

"I jumped in the bay at Neapolis and swam from boat to boat until I found the right crew. It didn't take long to realize that Cleon would do anything for me."

"Then the idea for this escapade was entirely your own?"

"Of course! Do you think a half-witted fisherman could come up with such a scheme? These fellows were born to be led. They were like fish in my net. They worship me—Cleon does, anyway—and why not?"

I scowled. "While you've been romping naked in the sun, enjoying your holiday with your admirers, your mother has been desperate with worry. Does that mean nothing to you?"

He crossed his arms and glared. "A little worry won't kill her. It's her fault, anyway. She could have made the old miser give me more money if she'd had the nerve to stand up to him. But she wouldn't, so I had to come up with my own scheme to get Pater to cough up a bit of what's rightfully mine anyway."

"And what about these fishermen? You've put them all in terrible danger."

"They know the risks. They also know how much they stand to profit."

"And Cleon?" I looked over my shoulder and caught him staring doe-eyed at Spurius. "The poor fellow is heartsick. What did you do to make him that way?"

"Nothing to embarrass Pater, if that's what you're getting at. Nothing Pater hasn't done himself, anyway, from time to time. I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

guess the gods pulled a joke on poor Cleon, making him fall in love with me. It suited my purposes well enough, but I shall be glad to be rid of him. Too much attention is trying. I'd rather be waited on by a slave instead of pursued by a suitor; you can get rid of a slave just by clapping your hands."

"Cleon could be hurt before this is over. He might even be killed if something goes wrong."

Spurius raised his eyebrows and looked beyond me at the low hills. "Then there *is* an armed guard. . . ."

"It was a stupid scheme, Spurius. Did you really think it would work?"

"It *will* work!"

"No. Unfortunately for you, young man, I have a vested interest not only in rescuing you, but in recovering the ransom as well. A portion of that gold will be mine."

Challenging him outright was a mistake. He might have offered to buy my silence, but Spurius was even more miserly than his father. He waved to Cleon, who came running. "Is all the gold loaded?"

"This is the last trip," said Cleon. The words seemed to catch in his throat. "The relay boat is loaded and ready. I'm going with them. And you? Are you coming with us, Spurius?"

Spurius scanned the hills above the beach. "I'm still not sure. But one thing's for certain—this man will have to be silenced!"

Cleon stared plaintively at Spurius, then glanced uneasily at me.

"Well," said the boy, "you have a knife, Cleon, and he doesn't. It should be simple. Go ahead and do it. Or do I need to summon another of the men from the relay boat?"

Cleon looked miserable.

"Well? Do it, Cleon! You told me you once killed a man in a brawl, in some rat-infested tavern down in Pompeii. That's one of the reasons I chose you to help me. You always knew it might come to this."

Cleon swallowed hard and reached to the scabbard that hung from his belt. He pulled out a jagged-edged knife of the sort fishermen use to gut and clean their catch.

"Cleon!" I said. "I know everything. The boy is simply using you. You must know that. Your affection is wasted on him. Put down your knife. We'll think of some way to rectify what you've done."

Spurius laughed and shook his head. "Cleon may be a fool, but he's not an idiot. The die is cast. He has no choice but to follow

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

through. And that means getting rid of you, Gordianus."

Cleon groaned. He kept his eyes on me but spoke to Spurius. "That day on the bay, when you swam up to our boat and climbed aboard, the moment I laid eyes on you I knew you'd bring me nothing but trouble. Your mad ideas—"

"You seemed to like my ideas well enough, especially when I mentioned the gold."

"Forget the gold! It was the others who cared about that. I only wanted—"

"Yes, Cleon, I know what you want." Spurius rolled his eyes. "And I promise, one of these days you'll get it. But right now . . ." Spurius waved his hands impatiently. "Pretend he's a fish. Gut him! Once that's done, we'll climb into the relay boat and be off with the gold, back to Neapolis."

"You're coming with us?"

"Of course. But not until this one is silenced. He knows too much. He'll give us all away."

Cleon stepped closer. I considered fleeing, but thought better of it; Cleon had to be more used to running on sand than I was, and I couldn't stand the idea of that jagged knife in my back. I considered facing him head-on; we were about the same size, and I probably had more experience at fighting hand-to-hand. But that didn't count for much, as he had a knife and I didn't.

My only advantage was that he was acting without conviction. There was heartsickness in his voice whenever he talked to Spurius, but also a tinge of resentment. If I could play on that, perhaps I could stave him off. I tried to think of a way to exploit his frustration, to turn him against the boy or at least keep him confused.

But before I could speak, I saw the change in Cleon's face. He made his decision quite literally in the twinkling of an eye. For the briefest instant I thought he might lunge at Spurius, like a cur turning on its master. How would I ever explain to Valeria that I stood by helplessly while her darling son was stabbed to death before my eyes?

But that was a wishful fantasy. Cleon didn't lunge at Spurius. He lunged at me.

We grappled. I felt a sudden burning sensation run down my right side, more as if I had been lashed by a whip than cut by a blade. But a cut it must have been—as the world spun dizzily around us I glimpsed a patch of sand spattered with blood.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We tumbled onto the ground. I tasted gritty sand between my teeth. I felt the heat and smelled the sweat of Cleon's body. He had been working hard, loading the gold into the relay boat. He was already tired. That was a good thing for me; I had just enough strength to fend him off until a figure came running from the boulders at the end of the beach.

Belbo had followed after all.

One instant Cleon was atop me, crushing the strength from my arms, bringing his blade closer and closer to my throat; the next moment it seemed that a god had snatched him by the back of his tunic and sent him soaring skyward. In fact it was Belbo who plucked him off me, lifted him into the air, and then slammed him to the ground. Only the lenient sand prevented him from being broken in two. He managed to hold onto his knife, but a sideways kick from Belbo sent it flying through the air. Belbo dropped to his knees onto Cleon's chest, knocking the breath out of him, and raised his fist like a hammer.

"No, Belbo, don't! You'll kill him!" I cried.

Belbo turned his head and gave me a quizzical frown. Cleon flailed like a fish beneath the weight on his chest.

Meanwhile, Cleon's three friends clambered out of the relay boat. So long as it was Cleon against me, they had stayed where they were, but now that Cleon was down and outnumbered, they came to his rescue, drawing their knives as they ran.

I got to my feet and ran after Cleon's knife. I picked it up, feeling queasy at the sight of my own blood on the jagged blade. Belbo was back on his feet, his own dagger drawn. Cleon remained flat on his back, gasping for breath. So, I thought: three against two, all parties armed. I had a giant on my side but my right arm was wounded. Did that make the odds even?

Apparently not, for the fishermen suddenly stopped in their tracks, bumped against one another in confusion, then ran back to their boat, calling for Cleon to follow. I basked for a moment in the illusion that I had frightened them off (with a little help from Belbo, of course), but realized that before they turned and ran they had been looking at something above and beyond me. I turned around. Sure enough, Marcus and some of his men had appeared atop the low hills and were running toward the beach with swords drawn.

Back in the relay boat, two of the fishermen scrambled for their oars while the third leaned toward the beach, crying for Cleon to join them. Cleon had managed to get to his hands and knees but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

couldn't seem to stand upright. I looked at Marcus and his men, then at the fishermen in the boat, then at Spurius, who stood not far from Cleon with his arms crossed, scowling as if he were watching a dismally unfunny comedy.

"For the love of Hercules, Spurius, why don't you at least help him to his feet!" I cried, and ran to do it myself. Cleon staggered up and I pushed him in the direction of the boat. "Run!" I said. "Run, unless you want to be a dead man!"

He did as I told him and went splashing into the surf. Then he suddenly stopped. The relay boat was pulling away, but he turned and stared at Spurius, who gave him a sardonic, aloof stare in return.

"Run!" I screamed. "Run, you fool!" The men in the boat called to him as well, even as they began to row rapidly away. But as long as Spurius met his gaze, Cleon remained frozen, struggling to stand upright in the waves, his face a mask of misery.

I ran to Spurius, put my hands on his shoulders, and spun him around. "Get your hands off me!" he snarled. But the spell was broken. Cleon seemed to wake. His face hardened. He turned and plunged into the waves, swimming after the relay boat.

I dropped onto the sand, clutching my bleeding arm. A moment later Marcus and his men arrived on the beach brandishing their swords.

Marcus satisfied himself that Spurius was unharmed, then turned his wrath on me. "You let one of them escape! I saw you help the man to his feet! I heard you telling him to run!"

"Shut up, Marcus. You don't understand."

"I understand they're getting away. Too far out now for us to swim after them. Damn! Just as well. We'll let them reach the bigger ship and then the *Crimson Ram* can take care of the lot of them."

Before I could puzzle out what he meant, Belbo let out a cry and pointed toward the water. Cleon had finally reached the relay boat. His friends were pulling him aboard. But something was wrong; the heavy-laden boat began to tip. The experienced fishermen should have been able to right it, but they must have panicked. All at once the relay boat was upside-down.

Marcus snarled. Spurius yelped. Together they cried, "The gold!"

Farther out, the fishermen on the larger ship were scrambling to set sail. They seemed awfully quick to abandon their friends, I thought, then saw the reason for their hurry. They had been able to see the approach of the warship before those of us on the beach

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

could see it. It was the red warship I had seen anchored in the water off Ostia. The bristling oars sliced into the water in unison. The bronze ram's head butted the spuming waves. The *Crimson Ram,* Marcus had called her. As soon as she came in sight around the bend of the cove, Marcus gave a signal to one of his men back on the hill, who began to wave a red cape—a signal that Spurius had been rescued and the action against the pirates could commence.

It seems impossible that what came to pass was intended by anyone; but then, that might describe everything about the whole disastrous affair. Surely the *Crimson Ram* meant to outflank the fishing vessel and board her to recover the gold. A warship should have been able to achieve such a capture with ease. But there was no accounting for the actions of the hapless fishermen. Just as their fellows in the relay boat had panicked, so did they. When the *Crimson Ram* moved to draw alongside, the fishing vessel seemed to turn as if intent on deliberate self-destruction, like a gladiator impaling himself on an enemy's sword, and offered her starboard flank to the massive bronze ram's head.

We heard the distant impact, the splintering of wood, the cries of the fishermen. The sail collapsed. The ship convulsed and folded in on itself. The vessel vanished into the roiling sea almost before I could comprehend the horror of it.

"By the gods!" muttered Belbo.

"The gold!" snarled Marcus.

"All that gold . . ." sighed Spurius.

The men from the capsized relay boat had set out swimming for their ship. Now they floundered in the water, trapped between the *Crimson Ram* and Marcus's men on shore. "They'll have to head in eventually," Marcus muttered, "along with any survivors from the other ship. We'll ring the cove and strike them down one by one as they crawl from the water. Men! Listen up!"

"No, Marcus!" I clutched my arm and staggered to my feet. "You can't kill them. The kidnapping was a hoax!"

"A hoax, was it? And the lost gold—I suppose that was only an illusion?"

"But those men aren't pirates. They're simple fishermen. Spurius put them up to the whole thing. They acted on his orders."

"They defrauded Quintus Fabius."

"They don't deserve to die!"

"That's not for you to say. Stay out of this, Finder."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No!" I ran into the surf. The scattered fishermen struggled in the waves, too far out for me to tell which was Cleon. "Stay back!" I screamed. "They'll kill you as you come ashore!"

Something struck the back of my head. Sea and sky merged into a solid white light that flared and then winked into darkness.

I awoke with a throbbing headache and a dull pain in my right arm. I reached up to find that my head was bandaged. So was my arm.

"Awake at last!" Belbo leaned over me with a look of relief. "I was beginning to think . . ."

"Cleon . . . and the others . . ."

"Shhh! Lean back. You'll set your arm to bleeding again. I should know; I learned a thing or two about wounds when I was a gladiator. Hungry? That's the best thing, to eat. Puts the fire back in your blood."

"Hungry? Yes. And thirsty."

"Well, you're in the right place for both. Here at The Flying Fish they've got everything a stomach needs."

I looked around the little room. My head was beginning to clear. "Where's Spurius? And Marcus?"

"Gone back to Rome with the rest, yesterday. Marcus wanted me to go, too, but I wouldn't. Someone had to stay with you. The master will understand."

I cautiously touched the back of my head through the bandages. "Someone hit me."

Belbo nodded.

"Marcus?"

Belbo shook his head. "Spurius. With a rock. He would have hit you again after you were down, but I stopped him. Then I stood over you to make sure he didn't do it again."

"The vicious little . . ." It made sense, of course. His scheme failed, the best Spurius could hope for was to silence everyone who knew about his plot, including me.

"Cleon and the rest—"

Belbo lowered his eyes. "The soldiers did as Marcus ordered."

"But they can't have killed them all. . . ."

"It was horrible to watch. Seeing men die in the arena is bad enough, but at least there's some sport when it's two armed men, both trained to fight. But the sight of those poor fellows coming out of the water, worn out and gasping for breath, pleading for mercy, and Marcus's men slaughtering them one after another . . ."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What about Cleon?"

"Him, too, so far as I know. 'Kill every one of them!' was what Marcus said, and his men did just that. Spurius helped, pointing and yelling whenever he saw one of them about to come ashore. They killed the pirates one by one and threw their bodies back into the sea."

I pictured the spectacle and my head began to throb. "They weren't pirates, Belbo. There never were any pirates." Suddenly the room became blurry. It wasn't from the blow to my head; it was only the tears welling up in my eyes.

A few days later I was back at the Senian Baths, lying naked on a bench while one of Lucius Claudius's slaves massaged me. My battered body needed pampering. My bruised conscience needed the release of pouring the whole sordid tale into Lucius's spongelike ear.

"Appalling!" he finally muttered. "You're very lucky to be alive, I should think. And when you got back to Rome, did you call on Quintus Fabius?"

"Of course, to collect the balance of my fee."

"Not to mention your share of the gold, I should think!"

I winced, and not from the massage. "That was something of a sore point. As Quintus Fabius pointed out, I was to be paid one-twentieth of whatever portion of the gold was actually recovered. Since the ransom was lost—"

"He cheated you on a technicality? How typical of the Fabii! But surely some of the gold washed up on the shore. Didn't they go diving for it?"

"They did, and Marcus's men recovered a little, but only a tiny fraction. My share hardly came to a handful of gold."

"Only that, after all your labor, and after putting yourself in so much danger! Quintus Fabius must be as miserly as his son claims! I suppose you told him the truth about the kidnapping?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, the very men who could back me up—the fishermen—are dead, and Spurius continues to blithely insist that he was kidnapped by pirates."

"The bald-faced young liar! Surely Quintus Fabius knows better than to believe him."

"Publicly, at least, he accepts his son's version of the story. But that's only to save himself the embarrassment of a scandal, I think. He probably suspected the truth all along. I think that's why he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sent me with the ransom, to find out for certain. And that's why he ordered Marcus to kill his son's accomplices on the spot, to keep the truth from getting out. Oh yes, he knows what really happened. He must detest Spurius more than ever, and the enmity is mutual."

"Ah, the type of family bitterness that so often ends in . . ."

"Murder," I said, daring to utter the unlucky word aloud. "I wouldn't care to wager which will outlive the other!"

"And the boy's mother, Valeria?"

"Her son subjected her to agonizing worry, just to satisfy his greed. I thought she had a right to know that. But when I tried to tell her, she suddenly seemed to go deaf. If she heard a word I said, she didn't show it. When I was done, she politely thanked me for rescuing her son from those awful pirates, then dismissed me."

Lucius shook his head.

"But I did get something I wanted from Quintus Fabius."

"Yes?"

"Since he refused to give me a full share of the ransom, I insisted that he give me something else he owned, a possession he clearly undervalued."

"Ah yes, your new bodyguard." Lucius glanced at Belbo, who stood across the room with folded arms, sternly guarding the niche that held my clothing as if it contained a senator's ransom. "The fellow is a treasure."

"The fellow saved my life on that beach outside Ostia. It may not be the last time."

Every now and again, business takes me south to the vicinity of Neapolis and the bay. I always make a point of visiting the waterfront where the fishermen congregate. I ask in Greek if any of them know of a young man named Cleon. Alas, the Neapolitans are a close-lipped, suspicious bunch. Not one of them has ever admitted to knowing a fisherman by that name, though surely someone in Neapolis must have known him.

I scan the faces on the fishing boats, on the chance that I might see him. For no good reason, I have convinced myself that he somehow eluded Marcus's men on that fateful day and made his way home.

Once, I was almost certain that I did get a glimpse of him. The man was clean-shaven, not bearded, but his eyes were Cleon's eyes. I called out from the dock, but the boat slipped by before I could get a better look. I was never able to confirm whether it was Cleon I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

saw or not. Perhaps it was a relative, or merely a man who resembled him. I didn't pursue the matter as fully as I might have, afraid perhaps the truth would disappoint me. I prefer to believe that it was Cleon after all, proof or no proof. Could there be two men in the world with those soulful green eyes? ●

CUSTOMER SERVICE OR SUBSCRIBER ASSISTANCE

Please direct all changes of address and subscription questions to: Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 5127, Harlan, IA 51593-5127.

For change of address, please advise 6 to 8 weeks before moving. Send your current mailing label with new address.

"SURE, YOUR TWENTY DOLLAR BILLS WERE GREAT, BUT YOU INSISTED ON USING YOUR OWN PICTURE!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

From our "GREAT MYSTERY" audio cassette series...

BUCKETS OF BLOOD

IN YOUR EAR!™

8 Ghoulish All-Star Tales

starring

Peter Lorre

4 full hours of audible

TERROR

on audio cassette!
Just as originally broadcast in 1947!

Terror-filled tales include: *The Marvelous Barastro, The Lodger, The Horla, Beyond Good and Evil, The Mask of Medusa, The Queen of Spades, The Black Cat* and *Crime and Punishment* in an attractive wooden gift crate!

RADIO YESTERYEAR®
Box C, Sandy Hook, CT 06482 or call
1-800-243-0987

Please make checks or money orders payable to Radio Yesteryear. Or you can **charge it** on **VISA, MasterCard, American Express, Diners Club, Carte Blanche** or **Discover.**

Credit Card Number

Signature

Expiration Date

1993 Radio Yesteryear

YES! Send me _____Buckets of Blood crates at $16.95 each. Please include $3.00 shipping and handling and applicable sales tax.

Total enclosed $_____

Name_____

Address_____

_____

City_____

State/Zip_____

Dept. 035 EL

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Joan Richter debuted in EQMM *in August of 1962 with two Department of First Stories entries. The author had been a creative writing student of Frederic Dannay, then editor of the magazine, and she went on to write several other fine stories for* EQMM *before a job with American Express in the 1980s sent her "rocketing around the world for the next ten years." She returns to us after this long hiatus with a story that is longer and more complex than her earlier stories . . .*

THE LAST RENDEZVOUS

by JOAN RICHTER

Detective Kenneth Reid looked around, taking in the spring growth of the Connecticut woods, the ferns and mountain laurel, the wild honeysuckle and the layers of white dogwood blossoms overhead. His friends called him Kentucky. He still had relatives there, but he didn't visit often.

He remembered a woods like this when he was a kid. The thought held him for a while, but then he glanced back down at the wet ground, to where the body lay.

"Well, I suppose you couldn't ask for a more peaceful place to die," he said, wanting to break the silence.

Beside him Charlie Player turned. His face was pale. Kentucky had never noticed the young man's freckles before, but he saw them now, like spatters of chocolate across his nose and cheeks. Kentucky waited, giving him time to pull it together. He was betting Player hadn't seen many bodies.

"There was no peace in the way this guy went," Player finally said.

"It doesn't look that way."

"I didn't know a body had that much blood."

Kentucky had thought that himself at first, but then he remembered last night's rain. With the layers of leaves on the ground acting like an oiled cloth, holding the rain, it looked like the man was lying in a deep pool of blood.

© 1995 by Joan Richter.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kentucky didn't want to make anything big of it, but it wouldn't be fair not to point it out. "Head wounds bleed a lot," he said matter-of-factly, "but some of what's here is rain water."

Player nodded.

They looked around, careful not to disturb the scene. The medical examiner and his crew were on the way.

Then, for the experience, and to help him collect his thoughts, Kentucky had Player make some notes.

Detectives Kenneth Reid and Charlie Player respond to call from patrol car two. Possible murder victim, male, found in woods behind West Hills Golf Club.

Kentucky figured the man had been dead about twenty-four hours, which meant the murder took place sometime Sunday afternoon, maybe early evening. If it was murder, there was no mystery about the weapon. It was there right alongside the body, a golf club. It looked like a number two iron.

This was Cranford's second murder in a year. If things kept up, they'd have to add more than a detective unit. They might even get around to getting us an unmarked car, Kentucky thought. He and Player had been on the job three months. Cranford hadn't had an investigative unit before.

Two men from the medical examiner's office arrived, but not the M.E. himself. He was away for a long weekend. Kentucky and Player hung around awhile, to hear the initial reactions and wait for the body to be identified.

The dead man's car was parked in a pull-off a hundred yards back, on the dirt road. An insurance card in the glove compartment and a driver's license in his wallet identified him as James Fullerton, 122 Oak Lane, Cranford.

Kentucky looked at Player. "He's been here all night. It's a wonder someone didn't report him missing. Let's go over to the Fullerton house and see what we find there."

Player drove. Kentucky was still learning his way around Cranford, having just moved over from Hartford. Player had gone to Cranford High and knew a shortcut behind the football field that would get them to Oak Street. "I used to have a girl that lived on Oak. I looked her up as soon as I got back here, but she's moved away."

Sarah Fullerton locked up her shop at five-thirty and headed for home, making a quick stop at the supermarket for some lemons.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She'd decided to make the sponge cake tonight for her book-club meeting tomorrow evening. If Valerie was still sick tomorrow, she wouldn't get home in time.

It was awhile since Valerie'd had one of those headaches. Sarah wondered what had brought it on, but she hadn't asked. With as much time as they spent together in the shop, it would have been easy to get too intimate and too involved in each other's lives. Neither one of them wanted that.

Sarah wondered about Val, how come she'd never married. Not only was she attractive, but she had a sweet temperament, and she was smart. Tall and blond, she had a terrific figure and played tennis like a pro. She coached at the indoor court near Essex, where she'd worked before they opened the shop together. She was thirty-six.

Sarah was forty-three. Maybe her question about Val's not marrying could be answered by her own seventeen-year marriage. It hadn't been what she'd hoped for. Having the shop had finally given her the courage to end it. That was only two months ago, so she was still getting used to the idea, but at the same time she wished she hadn't waited so long.

There were other things she had been slow at discovering—like herself. She knew that her hair was her best feature. "The color of polished chestnuts," her father used to say. It had a wave to it, so with a good cut and a quick blow dry, she could look like she'd just left the beauty salon. Between that and the eye makeup Valerie had persuaded her to buy on their trip to New York, Sarah knew she looked better than she had in years.

She was thinking about that, and smiling to herself, as she looked out the window over the kitchen sink. She had just finished rinsing out the mixing bowl when she saw a police car slow down and pull up in front of her house. She wondered what that was all about. Maybe the alarm at the shop had gone off.

They introduced themselves as Detectives Kenneth Reid and Charlie Player, Cranford Police. They were wearing business suits. They showed her their badges.

"Are you Mrs. James Fullerton?" the older of the two asked.

"My husband and I are separated," she said. "Sarah Fullerton is what I use now." The older one had an interesting rugged face and soft gray eyes. The younger one was tall and lanky, and looked like he'd be a natural on a basketball court. He called the senior man Kentucky.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When she thought about it later, she was sure it must have happened differently, but the way she recalled it, Kentucky said they had come with some bad news. The next thing she heard was that Jim was dead.

Something else must have transpired, she was certain, but all she could remember was hearing herself say, "Come into the kitchen. I have a cake in the oven."

The three of them were sitting at the kitchen table. She looked from one man to the other. Something in their expressions made her think they'd been sitting there for some time.

The windows were open, and she could hear the kids next door playing in the driveway. She'd started telling them about Cindy Clarke.

"She's a flight attendant, and lives near the airport in Providence. Jim told me that's where I could reach him. I've talked to him once, but I haven't seen him since he left two months ago."

Jim had given her Cindy Clarke's address and phone number. In case of an emergency, is what he'd said.

"What kind of emergency did your husband have in mind?"

"Something like the furnace giving out, I suppose, but I wouldn't have called him for that, not anymore." It was Kentucky who had asked her that. She heard the soft accent in his voice now, and realized that he was from the South. The nickname suited him. "I'm sure Jim hadn't thought about this kind of emergency."

She knew she had begun to ramble, and that her voice sounded uneven, as though she were in a car going over a corrugated road. She pressed her lips together.

Kentucky shifted in his chair. "Mrs. Fullerton, how did you feel about your husband leaving you for another woman?"

She stared at him, trying to think of how she wanted to answer that. If she told him the truth, she would sound pathetic. Well, she had been. But she wasn't now. "It wasn't all that new."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Jim had a history of going with other women. He had a magic touch with women. He would listen to a woman and ask her questions and make her feel that what she said and thought were important. Most men don't know how to do that, and a lot don't care to. Combined with those blue eyes of his . . . well, it was hard for a woman not to fall for him."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The younger detective made a kind of clicking sound with his tongue, and Sarah turned to look at him.

"Sorry, ma'am. That's a bad habit I have." He pushed his hair back off his forehead. "I was hearing what you said. That's a lot to tolerate in a man. How did you manage it?"

She guessed it was a question a lot of people might ask.

"It wasn't easy. But it was different after I opened my business. I don't mean that Jim was different. I was. I had something else to occupy my mind, and his . . . his infidelity . . . didn't bother me the way it had before."

She looked away then and thought about the shop, and how important it had become to her. How exciting it was to unlock the door each morning and step inside, knowing that it was hers, something she had built from nothing. Of course, without Valerie it wouldn't have happened. With Valerie's encouragement she'd taken a wild idea and turned it into a successful business.

"What kind of business do you have, ma'am?" Charlie Player asked.

"It's a shop on Bellevue. It's called Once Is Not Enough. You've probably seen it. It's a consignment clothes shop, across the street from Pierson's Drug Store."

She glanced down at the table and saw with surprise that her hand was cupped around a coffee mug. There was one in front of each of the detectives. She glanced toward the counter and saw the sponge cake cooling on a wire rack. The timer must have gone off, and when she'd gotten up to take the cake out of the oven, she'd made a pot of coffee.

Her voice was thready when she spoke again.

"I used to think that if I knew who Jim was involved with, I could have some control over it."

She stopped, as abruptly as she'd started, not anxious to think about that period of her marriage, when she had taken to following him. That had been her lowest point. It made her skin creep to remember it.

Kentucky was looking at her, his gray eyes thoughtful.

"When I was first married I had a job with a printing company in Middletown, but the company moved to Baltimore. It couldn't have come at a worse time. Jim had just taken up with someone and I was too dispirited to look for another job. I helped out at a church and I did some volunteer work at the hospital. I did that for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

years, but it wasn't enough. Then I began to think about opening my own business."

"What kind of a business did you say you have?" Kentucky asked.

"Well, it's selling women's clothes. With consignments you don't need much capital to start up a business. And with clothes all you need is hangers and a place to hang them. We started out in a small store on Spring Street, near the railroad station, but we have a larger shop now, in the center of town. It's turned into a good business. There are a lot of shops like ours opening up, all over the country. There was an article in the Sunday *Times* last month. There's one in New York on Madison Avenue that's been there for more than thirty years. Women don't hang onto their clothes the way men do. But they can't afford just to toss them out and buy new things. In shops like mine, one woman's discard becomes another woman's treasure." She stopped and smiled apologetically.

"That was a long answer about my business," she said and turned away, toward the window. It was getting dark. A breeze ruffled the curtains. Why was she talking so much? Her cheeks felt strangely cold. She touched them and discovered they were wet.

"I gave you her phone number, didn't I? Cindy Clarke's? This is going to be hard on her." She swallowed to get her voice under control. "She needs to know. You'll tell her, won't you? I can't do it. I've never met her. Jim told me she was twenty-eight. He was fifty last year."

Kentucky cleared his throat. "We'll be in touch with her, but we wanted to talk to you first. Do you know what airline she works for?"

"I think Jim said it was TransContinental."

Sarah watched as he wrote that down, then looked up slowly and leaned toward her. "Mrs. Fullerton, you haven't asked us how your husband died."

She frowned. They had told her, hadn't they? Had she just assumed it was a heart attack? "He was always worried about his heart. That's the way his father died, and his older brother. I must have thought . . ."

Kentucky continued to study her, and for a moment it made her feel uncomfortable, but the feeling didn't last long. His gaze was so steady she found herself wanting to hold onto it.

When he finally spoke, it was in a slow, even voice. "Your husband's car was found early this afternoon on one of the roads in the woods near the West Hills Golf Club."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She nodded. "He was a member of West Hills. He liked to play golf, and he liked the woods, especially when spring came. He used to park his car in one of the pull-offs and go to a place where there were a lot of dogwoods in bloom. . . . He took me there before we were married."

Kentucky interrupted her, his voice more firm than she had heard it before. "Mrs. Fullerton. This is going to be hard for you, but you have to hear it. Your husband died in those woods, the woods you just described, where all the dogwood is in bloom. But it doesn't look as though he died of a heart attack. It looks as though he was murdered."

She looked away from him and stared straight ahead. She closed her eyes. She wanted to shut out the scene—that secluded, special place where the dogwood bloomed. But there was nothing she could do to stop the images that moved across her mind. They were not new. She had lived with them for years. She had tried to push them down and layer them with other thoughts, but now they were fresh again. She brought her hand to her mouth and held back a moan.

"Ma'am." Player's voice startled her, her eyes flew open and her head jerked in his direction.

"Ma'am, what kind of work did your husband do?"

"He was an electrical engineer. He worked on contract."

"Ma'am, did your husband have any men friends?"

"He got along with them in business. He golfed with some, but nobody close."

"What about hobbies, ma'am? Was there anything special he liked to do?"

"He liked to repair things. He was a good carpenter. And he liked to read. Whenever he met somebody new, he would find out what they were interested in, or what kind of work they did. Then he'd go to the library and come back with books about it."

"When you say somebody new, do you mean a new woman?" Charlie Player asked.

"Yes," she said quietly, and looked toward the door, and realized she was seeing Jim right now, with a load of books in his arms.

There had been a wide range of subjects over the years—speech therapy, rocks and jewelry making, singing, genetics, pottery, nursing, and most recently the airline industry and passenger safety.

"Ma'am." Player recalled her from her daydream. "Ma'am, your husband was killed sometime yesterday afternoon, maybe early evening."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sarah looked at the clock on the stove. It was six-thirty. It would be dark soon. Jim had been dead a whole day.

"We've already checked with the golf club. He hadn't signed up to play yesterday, and no one remembers seeing him. Did your husband usually play golf on Sundays?"

"Usual isn't a good word to describe Jim. Sometimes he played on Sundays."

It was Kentucky who leaned toward her then, as soft-spoken as he had been before. "Ma'am, can you tell us where you were yesterday afternoon?"

Yesterday was Sunday, she had to remind herself. She'd gone to church in the morning. The service was at eleven. After that she and Pastor Bicks and his wife drove to Essex to a flower show. "We had planned to go to an afternoon movie, but Mrs. Bicks turned her ankle and we came back early. They dropped me off. I got home about four."

"And what did you do then?"

"I stayed here, made some supper, watched *Sixty Minutes,* read the Sunday paper, and worked on the crossword puzzle."

She was suddenly overwhelmingly tired. She leaned forward and rested her arms on the table, hugging her elbows. "I don't mean to be rude, but I'd like to be alone now."

Kentucky looked at Player and nodded. The two men rose. "Just one more thing. Do you know of anyone who would have a reason to kill your husband?"

She stared at him for a long moment and then shook her head. "I know what you're asking me, but I didn't know them all."

It was almost dark when they pulled away from the Fullerton house. At the top of the incline of Oak Street Kentucky had to swerve to avoid a kid sailing out of a driveway on a skateboard. He thought of turning on the siren to give the boy a scare, but the kid was halfway down the hill already. There was no point in disturbing the quiet street.

"I'll drop you off at the station, and then I'll go on over to see the minister," Kentucky said. "You give the girlfriend a call."

"Sure. You don't think the wife did it, do you?"

Kentucky shrugged. "You know the way it's supposed to go. You start with the wife and then the girlfriend."

"Yeah, I know that, but that isn't what I asked you."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, the answer is I don't know. The wife is always my first guess, and I suppose I'll stay with that for now. It sounds like Sarah Fullerton had a whole harem full of reasons. But it's too soon to tell. Let's see what the minister and the girlfriend have to say. And there's the lab we have to hear from."

Player got out of the car, but didn't close the door. He leaned back in, folding himself over the door. Kentucky stared, marveling at his contortion.

"What makes a nice woman like that stay with such a bum?" Player asked.

Kentucky shrugged. He used to ask those kinds of questions. He didn't anymore. He'd gotten tired of not knowing the answers. "A lot of things. Security. Habit. Who knows?" He smiled. "Just because I'm at the half-century mark doesn't mean I have all the answers."

"Somehow I thought you did." Player grinned, straightened, and was about to close the door.

"Hold it a minute," Kentucky called out. "That was nice work you did back there, coming in with those questions about what her husband did for a living. I thought she'd frozen up on us for good. Changing the subject right quick like that got her unstuck and going again. Where'd you learn to do that?"

Player kept grinning. "I'll tell you over a beer sometime."

"I'll remind you," Kentucky said with a chuckle. "Get onto that stewardess now, and don't forget to check her story with the airline."

"Flight attendant," Player said and shut the door.

The Presbyterian church was a red-brick building with a white steeple on Sycamore Avenue. Reverend Bicks and his wife lived in a small wood-frame house across from it. Kentucky hadn't met them before. The minister came to the door.

"I heard Cranford had gotten itself a detective squad," the minister said after Kentucky had introduced himself. He led the way into a small living room where there were lace curtains at the windows.

"Not a squad, exactly," Kentucky said, hiding a smile. "There are just two of us. It's something new Cranford is trying out. We just came on board three months ago."

"So I heard. And it's a good idea. Too bad, though. A few years ago there wouldn't have been anything for you to do here. But with the city elements creeping in, things are different. Everyone locks their doors and windows now, and if you're going to be away, you make sure somebody cuts your lawn."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kentucky nodded politely and then went directly to explaining the reason for his visit.

The minister shook his head. "I can't say I was ever very fond of Jim Fullerton. My wife and I often wondered how Sarah put up with him. But murder, that's something else again. Sarah's a fine woman. She sure doesn't deserve this kind of trouble."

"Mrs. Fullerton said she spent yesterday afternoon with you and your wife."

"Yes, that's right. We went over to Essex. There was a flower show the ladies wanted to see. They were hoping to get some ideas for some new plantings for the front of the church. My wife tripped and sprained her ankle, and we came home early. She's still resting it. The doctor strapped it up and told her to keep it elevated for a few days."

"What time was it when you took Mrs. Fullerton home?"

"It was about three o'clock when we got back, but we didn't take her home. She had her car in the parking lot behind the church."

Sarah had watched the detectives drive up the hill, and then she closed the windows and drew the blinds. When she'd rinsed out the coffee mugs, she went into the living room and flipped the switch that turned on the lamps at each end of the sofa.

She wanted to go back over everything they had said, but she knew she would have trouble remembering it all.

She'd meant to ask them sooner than she had about just how Jim had died, but after she heard where his body had been found, her mind just shut down. It was Kentucky who told her. "Our guess is that it was a blow to the head," he said.

It seemed he was going to leave it at that, but she pressed him for details.

"We'll know more after the autopsy, but it looks as though it was a golf club."

It had taken all the strength she had to control herself then, but now she sank back against the sofa pillows and closed her eyes and allowed herself to see it all. It was like opening an album of photographs that had been carefully framed, snapped, and then neatly pasted in proper sequence. No, it was more than that. Her memory had none of the limits of a camera lens.

It began with Jim driving her along the dirt road behind the golf course. It wasn't much more than a fire lane, with woods on both sides. When he came to the pull-off, he braked slowly and then eased

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

into it, careful not to get too close, not wanting to scratch the car. Then, with the engine stopped, the hush of the woods engulfed them, magnifying the sound of the car doors opening and closing. Louder still was the slam of the car trunk. Jim had gone into it to take the number two iron from his golf bag—in case of snakes. They would walk along the dirt road then, looking for an opening into the woods. All sound was muted by the soft moist earth, except for the occasional high note of a bird or the rustle of a squirrel. Around them was the heady scent of honeysuckle.

Jim chose a different way into the woods each time, not wanting to beat a path and mark it for someone else to find. When he found a place that suited him, he would take the lead and part the way, careful not to break any branches and leave telltale scars. In the spring the sap was running and the new growth was supple, but even so their movements were deliberate and slow, adding a high charge to the counterpoint of their racing pulses, eager to reach their destination.

Finally, they arrived at the secret place, that small protected glade encircled by dogwood in white bloom. Jim would take his final step and then, like an actor on a stage, turn and toss the golf club to the ground, reach out, and invite her into his arms.

The memory rose and swept over her with the force of a hurricane. She felt the tremble begin and tried to stop it, but it swelled and went on, rolling over her, out of control. She clutched herself and waited for the awful turbulence of longing and regret to pass, helplessly reliving the moment when their bodies touched. She cried out, and then at last began to sob.

At police headquarters Player dialed Cindy Clarke's number for the third time. "Damn! She's probably off on a trip." He'd wanted to talk to her before he called the airline. Then on the fourth ring she answered, a throaty voice, breathing hard.

He almost said he liked her voice, but decided he'd better not. Instead he told her who he was and asked how come she didn't have an answering machine.

"I hate coming back to a string of messages. I shut it off when I'm gone. If anyone really wants me, they'll call again."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Say, who did you say you are? This is the kind of call I don't need."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Sorry," he said and told her again, "Detective Charlie Player." He was glad Kentucky wasn't hearing any of this. "I'm with the Cranford Police."

"Are you collecting for the policeman's ball or something?"

He laughed, but not too hard. He had to get on track and fast. "Say, I've started us off in a wrong direction. I'm afraid I'm calling with some bad news. It's about James Fullerton. . . ."

She went off like a rocket. A redhead, he'd bet. "What about Jim Fullerton? I kicked him out last Thursday. So whatever you have to say about him, I'm not interested."

He took a breath and hoped she was ready for it. "I'm afraid the bad news is that he's dead."

For a moment all he heard was silence and then the throaty voice in a higher pitch. "You're kidding. What happened to him?"

She sounded all right, but you could never tell. He'd take it slow. "We found him in the woods near the West Hills Golf Club. It looks as though he died sometime yesterday afternoon."

There was a slight gasp that turned into a sour laugh. "Tell me if I have it right—all moss and ferns and mountain laurel and dogwood trees?"

"You've been there?"

"I've been there, and so has half the female population in the Northeast, probably. That's where Jim tried to take my best friend while I was away. She told me when I came back. I kicked him out."

Smart girl, he said to himself, and decided to go straight to the point. "Miss Clarke, where were you yesterday afternoon?"

"In San Francisco," she said without a flinch. "My flight got into Providence an hour ago. Why are you asking me that?"

"Well, you see, it looks as though Jim Fullerton was murdered."

"Murdered! And you think I . . ." He heard the beginning of another laugh, but it stopped midstream. For a while all he got was silence, and then he realized she was crying. He waited, giving her time. Even a louse deserves a tear, he supposed.

When she came back on the line, her voice was steady. "I've been acting like this is some kind of joke."

"That was my fault," he said.

"Well, maybe, but I gave you some room." She paused. "Jim's dead. I mean dead. Murdered. . . . Don't ask me why, but I suddenly thought of his wife and I just started to cry. I didn't know he was married, not at first. I met him three months ago. He was on one of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my flights from Chicago. He'd been at a convention. He really didn't mean that much to me."

Player listened to her take a deep breath and wondered if she was going to cry again, but instead she said, "I don't know if his wife is going to want to hear this from me. But would you tell her how sorry I am?"

"I'll do that," he said. "Tell me, what was it about this guy that had you fall for him?"

"He was smart. He seemed to know about a lot of things. He was good at asking questions and then listening. I think maybe it was the listening that got to me. Not many people know how to listen. Men, particularly, aren't good at that."

Player had just finished checking out Cindy Clarke's story with the airline when Kentucky walked into the room. He could tell from the brightness in his eyes that he had some news.

"I just talked to the lab. There were no identifiable prints on the golf club, except for Fullerton's. Too bad, but no surprise." He settled himself into the chair alongside Player's desk. "His car made up for it, though. Enough prints and hair and makeup for a beauty parlor. That Fullerton was one busy boy."

Player shook his head. "I don't get a guy like that. All he was interested in was scoring?"

Kentucky shrugged. "Don't look to me for answers on that. How did you make out with the girlfriend?"

"She wasn't exactly bowled over when I told her he was dead. But she's in the clear. She was in San Francisco. And that checks out with the airline."

Kentucky nodded. "So that eliminates her. Did she have anything else to say?"

"It seems she and Fullerton parted company. She threw him out last week when she found out he'd been making moves on a friend of hers." Player frowned. "I asked her what was so special about him. She said he was a good listener, and that most men weren't. That gave me something to think about."

"And what did you come up with?"

"Hell, I don't know," Player said, and leaned back in his chair. "What did the minister have to say?"

"The three of them all went to Essex together, just like Sarah said. But they didn't bring her home. The pastor said her car was at the church, and they left her there at three o'clock."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Player took a deep breath and blew out his cheeks. "So you think she lied to us?"

"We'll have to find out about that," Kentucky said, and Player wondered if he was disappointed. He'd had the feeling the old bluegrass bachelor might have been ready to strum his guitar for the lady.

Kentucky looked at his watch. "Let's get on over there. If she still has her lights on, we'll ring her doorbell. If not, we'll wait until tomorrow. I'd sure like to hear what she has to say about this."

Sarah had made herself some scrambled eggs for supper and was watching the news when Pastor Bicks called a second time. He asked her if she was sure she didn't want him to come over. She thanked him, but said she'd rather be alone.

"If you change your mind, let me know," he said and went on to talk about his visit from the police. "It's the first time I met anyone from that investigation unit Cranford has now. I'd heard about it, but I hadn't expected to be meeting them so soon. Detective Reid said there are just two of them. He seemed like a likeable fellow."

"They were both here," Sarah said. "The other one is very young. He looks like he could still be in high school." They said goodbye soon after that and she sat by the phone, trying to decide whether to call Valerie. If it was one of those bad migraines, Val wouldn't be out of it yet. Sarah decided to wait until the morning.

She thought about tomorrow. Kentucky had said they should have the autopsy report in the morning. After that the body would be released to the funeral home. She should stop thinking of him as Kentucky. It was too familiar. She'd have to close the shop for a few days.

In the living room she turned on WTFM, knowing she could get something soothing and soft there, then took the pad and pencil out of the desk drawer and looked at the list of names she had begun earlier.

She had stopped caring about Jim and his women, or at least that's what she convinced herself she had to do. But it was always there—the knowing, hovering like a dark cloud, accompanied by wondering who it was. Who would be next?

Who had it been this time? Who had he taken to the woods yesterday? Had someone met him there? Or followed him?

She looked at the names she had written down. There were probably others that she didn't remember, and some she had never even

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

known about. She leaned back against the sofa and tried to think.

When the doorbell rang, she sat up with a start and realized that she had dozed off. It was almost ten o'clock. She was surprised they were coming this late. The pad and pencil slid off her lap onto the floor. She retrieved them and put them into the drawer. On her way to the door, she turned off the radio and stopped at the hallway mirror to smooth her hair. She was glad she'd thought to wash her face after supper and freshen her makeup.

"Sorry to bother you so late, Mrs. Fullerton," Kentucky said. "We wouldn't have, if your lights hadn't been on, but since they were, we decided not to wait until morning."

She led them into the living room, and motioned them into the two chairs across from the sofa.

After she had settled herself, Kentucky cleared his throat. "I'll get right to the point. We talked to Cindy Clarke."

She nodded. "I hoped that you would."

"Actually it was Player who talked to her. He'll tell you about it, but first I want to talk to you about the Reverend. You told us he and his wife dropped you off at your house at four."

Sarah shook her head. "Did I? I'm sorry, I don't exactly know what I said. I said a lot of things." She felt herself flush.

"He told me you got back from Essex at three, that you had your car at the church."

"That's right. I drove there for the eleven o'clock service. We went to Essex in Pastor Bicks's car. It was a good thing. We'd never have made it in mine."

"How's that, ma'am?" Player asked.

"I had no trouble getting it started, but I hadn't gone a block when it began to lose power. I managed to get it to Jerry's, on the corner of Bellevue and Maple. They're open on Sundays, but only for gas, and only until four. The attendant said I could leave it there overnight and one of the mechanics would look at it in the morning. They had it fixed by nine-thirty today."

"You were without a car the rest of Sunday?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

She saw the two of them exchange glances, as though they were surprised by her question.

"I guess we need to be more direct about this," Kentucky said. He leaned forward, his gray eyes holding hers. "Did you kill your husband?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She stared at him. "Kill Jim?" She sank back against the cushions. "I won't say I hadn't thought about it. But contemplating something is a long way from doing it. No, I didn't kill him."

She watched the expression on Kentucky's face change, and she wondered if she was reading something into it that wasn't there. He looked relieved. He turned then and nodded to Player, inviting him to take over.

"I talked to your husband's girlfriend," Player said. Ex-girlfriend, he thought, but he wouldn't get into that. "She was in San Francisco yesterday, so we know she's out of the picture."

Sarah started to say something, but stopped when she saw Player move to the edge of the chair and awkwardly bend forward into the open spread of his bony knees, leaning toward her.

"Ma'am, you said the two of you never met—you and Cindy Clarke."

"That's right. She didn't say we had?"

He shook his head. "Ma'am, there's something I don't understand. Your husband left you for Cindy Clarke. And yet you were concerned about her. You asked us to make sure we let her know what happened. Can you explain that to me?"

Sarah frowned. "I'm not sure what you want me to explain. I assume she loved him, or thought she did. He'd probably given her enough reason to think he felt the same way about her. He was good at that, making a woman feel like she was important to him. The only thing is, it never lasted. I knew that, but Cindy Clarke didn't."

She caught Kentucky studying her again. She didn't quite understand the look on his face. It wasn't Player's puzzlement she saw there. He just seemed thoughtful.

"I just felt sorry for her," she said, looking back at Player. "You see, she had nothing to do with Jim's leaving me. That was Jim."

She glanced at Kentucky. The lines around his gray eyes were more pronounced than earlier. It was late. She was tired. He must be, too. The younger man was still wound up. He had listened hard to what she had said, as though it were some complicated equation she was explaining.

"Ma'am, I hear what you're saying. But I can't imagine any women I know not wanting to claw each other's eyes out in a situation like this."

Sarah smiled. "Maybe you just watch more TV than I do."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Could be," he said and smiled. "By the way, Cindy Clarke asked me to tell you she was sorry."

Sarah took a deep breath and swallowed hard, holding back the threat of tears. "Thank you for telling me that," she said. "The only thing I can say is Jim always seemed to pick nice women."

They left soon after that, saying they would be in touch with her in the morning. She locked the door, returned to the living room, and stood there for a moment, looking around. The room felt empty. She turned on the radio again.

She was exhausted, but there were things she had to think about. She couldn't go to bed yet. Where would the detectives go with their investigation? She imagined how long it might go on, and all the people they would want to question. One person would lead to another. She shrank at the thought of it. Cranford was a small town. How would she be able to stand the scrutiny, all the innuendo? And what about Valerie?

She went to the desk and took the pad from the drawer and tore off the top sheet. She stood there looking at the names she had written. There was one she hadn't put down, even though it belonged there. So many of Jim's love affairs had involved women she had known, and liked. Some had been her friends, whom he'd set about seducing.

With Valerie it had been different. Sarah had hardly known her. Val had lived in Saybrook then. They'd met briefly in the half-day orientation class for volunteers at Middle County Hospital, but afterwards they were assigned to different days. Sarah might never have known about Jim's involvement with her if it hadn't been for the books on pottery he had brought home. The one thing Sarah knew about Valerie was that she was an accomplished potter.

A few months after that, Sarah found herself sitting next to Valerie in the hospital van. They'd been asked to accompany Elvira Morris, a sweet, elderly woman, in her transfer to a nursing home.

If it hadn't been for the pink volunteer jacket Valerie was wearing, Sarah would hardly have known her, and would have mistaken her for a patient. She was drawn and hollow-eyed. Sarah didn't even have to guess at the cause. She knew. Jim had moved on.

Fortunately she and Valerie had Mrs. Morris to deal with that day. The poor woman had been in the hospital two months, and was confused by having to move. Her closest family was a son living on the West Coast. The nursing home had suggested the move would

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

be less traumatic for Mrs. Morris if someone she knew accompanied her to the home. As it turned out, Sarah and Valerie were her two favorite volunteers.

It was six months before Sarah saw Valerie again. But during that time she learned that the director of volunteers had noticed how bad Valerie looked, and had taken her under her wing and seen to it that Valerie got some counseling. Word was that Valerie was on the mend.

Then Sarah received a note from Mrs. Morris's son. He was coming East for his mother's eighty-fifth birthday and was having a small party. He hoped that Sarah could come.

Sarah went. Valerie was there. After that, they began visiting Mrs. Morris together. It was on their drives to the nursing home that Sarah began talking about wanting to start a small business.

They'd opened the shop three years ago. Sarah had never let on that she knew of Valerie's affair with Jim, and as a result she talked about him as little as possible. They saw one another every weekday, but went in different directions on weekends. Valerie played tennis and Sarah had her own things to do. A few times a year they went into New York and stayed the weekend. They went to the theater and window-shopped along Madison and Fifth Avenues, staying in touch with the latest fashions. This August they were planning to take a trip together to Bermuda.

The shop was doing well and they enjoyed working together. Everything seemed to be going along fine, and then Jim had come after Valerie again.

Sarah saw it first in Valerie's eyes, that drawn and haunted look of torment and despair. It was in Valerie's face on Saturday, after they had closed the shop and stood in the parking lot behind the bank. There were no customers to distract them, only the intermittent glare of the sun in their faces as it shifted through the branches of a tall oak tree.

Sarah leaned her head back against the sofa cushions and wondered when Valerie had decided to do what she had done. Had it just happened, or had she made a careful plan? Had she gone with Jim or had she followed him there?

None of that mattered. What did was what would happen now. Would the detectives turn up evidence that would lead to Valerie? Sarah shuddered to think what that would mean.

The questions kept piling up and Sarah felt as though her head

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was about to burst. There was Jim's death to deal with. She'd already told Pastor Bicks she wanted a simple burial, no service in a church that Jim had never attended. The minister hadn't tried to persuade her otherwise.

What she needed now was sleep. She rose and went into the kitchen and stood by the sink. She switched on the garbage disposal and turned the water on. Then she tore the sheet of paper with all the names into tiny pieces and pushed them down the drain.

In Tony's Pizza Palace, across from the police station, the two large pies Player had ordered arrived and took over the table. Kentucky surveyed them. "Any chance I get to take a slice home?"

"Only if I hold back," Player said with a grin, popping a can of beer. "What do you think? Will we find out who did it?"

"It's hard to tell," Kentucky answered.

"Well, what would you guess?"

"I'm not much good at guessing. I talked to the lab. They said they'll have something interesting to tell us tomorrow morning."

"That's cute. Why not tonight?"

"They've got their own way of handling things, and besides, the big boss is away. They may feel a little insecure."

Player reached for a slice of pizza and Kentucky saw the steam rise. "Count to twenty," he said. "My sister always did. She never burned her mouth, not once."

"Thanks. I wish I'd had a sister. Three brothers is what I had, all bigger than me. They played football." He let the slice dangle in his hand. "Any guesses on what the lab has?"

"I told you, I'm no good at guessing, but that doesn't stop me from thinking. I don't know how they could find much in those woods, not with all the rain last night. I suppose that love nest will be just like Fullerton's car—another beauty parlor. Only God knows how many women he took there."

Player tipped back his head and opened his mouth. Half the slice disappeared. When he'd finished the rest of it, he looked at Kentucky. "Let me ask you something. Have you ever done it in the woods?"

"What kind of question is that?"

Player shrugged. "It's just a question. It's hard not to think about it, considering what we've been dealing with all day."

Kentucky reached for his beer. "Well, suppose I answer you this way. You've got kind of a short season up here in the North. Where

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I come from the dogwoods bloom earlier and the season stays warmer a lot longer."

Player let out a guffaw.

Sarah had awakened at six. She'd had her breakfast, taken a shower, and blown her hair dry. She listened to the weather report and decided on a dark-green suit and a silk blouse. She was putting on a pair of gold earrings when the phone rang. She picked it up on the second ring, trying to anticipate who it would be—Valerie, the police, or Pastor Bicks.

His voice had a deeper twang on the phone than in person. He started out by apologizing for calling so early.

"It isn't so early," she said. "I've been up for some time."

He said he had something to tell her, and that she might want to sit down.

Sarah took his advice and sat on the edge of the bed. For the next two minutes she listened and didn't say a word. When Kentucky was finished, her heart was racing so fast she thought it would fly right out of her chest.

She didn't know where she managed to find her voice, but it came from somewhere. He'd said he couldn't come over right then, which is why he called, but he wanted to stop by in the afternoon. She told him three o'clock would be fine.

When the phone was back in its cradle, she kept looking at it, taking deep breaths and trying to get herself under control. She had to get to Valerie, and fast.

She took a minute to think through what she had to say and then dialed her number. When Val answered, she plunged right in.

"Val, I'm not even going to ask how you feel. You'll understand as soon as I tell you. Jim's passed away." She almost bit her tongue at those words. Somehow they didn't quite describe what had happened. "He died of a heart attack." It was important to get that out right away. "The police found him yesterday, in the woods behind the golf course. At first they suspected foul play. There were some bruises on his head, but the autopsy showed they weren't the cause of his death. It was his heart." She wanted to take a breath, but she didn't dare.

"I'm going to need some help, Val. My head's in a muddle. I need you to come over here. We need to close the shop for a few days. Then I want to go away. I thought instead of waiting until August to go to Bermuda, we could go now." She stopped then, having said

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

all she could think of saying. She hoped she'd covered it all. If Val started crying and talking about what had happened, she didn't know what she would do.

"Val?" Sarah waited.

Then Val's voice came on. "I'm on my way, Sarah."

The sun was shining, and as Player pulled into the parking lot behind police headquarters, he was humming to himself. When he walked into the station house, the hum turned into a whistle. The desk clerk looked up and pointed toward the back room. "Your buddy's been looking for you."

He found Kentucky bent over his desk, studying a report.

"What's up? It's only quarter to. We agreed to meet at nine."

"I couldn't sleep. Must have been all that pepperoni." Kentucky motioned to the chair alongside his desk. "Have a seat. I've got a message for you."

"What's that?"

"That stewardess called this morning, early. She said she had to fly to San Francisco, so she can't meet you at the Moonlight Mile tonight."

Player slid down in the chair, clasped his hands behind his head, and stretched his legs out as far as they would go. "Say, why are you doing this to me? I thought we did okay yesterday."

Kentucky nodded. "We did."

Player sat up straight. "Well, then, I've had enough of your Southern wit. What's the word on Jim Fullerton?"

"You're not going to believe me when I tell you."

"Try me."

"They decided that the golf club didn't do the damage. It was a rock, a sharp piece of Connecticut granite."

"You mean someone hit him on the head with a rock?"

Kentucky shook his head. "The rock was in the ground. He fell on it and hit his head."

"Jesus, Kentucky. Give me a break."

"According to the medical examiner, the cause of death was a heart attack."

"Say, cut it out. This isn't funny anymore."

"I'm serious. I said you wouldn't believe me. Look for yourself. It's right here in the autopsy report. Have a look."

Player took the folder Kentucky handed him and read the top sheet. "I don't believe this."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, I didn't either, at first. But I do now. They figure Fullerton had the attack standing up and then fell forward. Under all those soft leaves was this sharp rock poking up. The head bruise didn't kill him, although that's the way it looked at first. The lab almost told us last night, but since everybody had been thinking murder, they wanted to be sure."

"So that's the end of it?"

"Yup. That's it. Case closed. Of course, you might have some loose ends to tie up."

"Me?"

"I was just kidding about the Moonlight Mile, but Cindy Clarke did call you. Here's the number she left. She said she'd be at home tonight. She's got a nice voice. Ask her if she ever sings blues." Kentucky got up and stretched.

Player stared at him. "Did you tell her what the autopsy showed?"

"No, I thought I'd let you do that, just in case you run out of conversation."

"Boy, are you on some kind of roll this morning. What about Mrs. Fullerton? Shouldn't we go over and tell her?"

"I've already talked to her. Told her we couldn't come over this morning. But I'd stop by this afternoon."

"Just you?"

"Well, I thought so. Doesn't take two of us, does it? Besides, I need some practice listening."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

I am currently chairing the committee to select the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar Award winner for best novel of 1994. Because of my steady reading of the whole year's output, some of the books considered below have been out awhile and may take some finding. But they're worth the search: Among them are some of the finest crime novels of the year.

**** Mary Willis Walker: *The Red Scream,* Doubleday, $19.95. With the current popularity of true crime, what amateur detective figure could be more fictionally useful than the non-fiction crime writer? Molly Cates is about to cover the execution, following eleven years of appeals, of Louis Bronk, serial killer turned deathhouse poet and purported born-again Christian. But it gradually develops that the murder of Tiny McFarland, wife of millionaire developer Charlie and the centerpiece of Molly's recent book on the case, may have been someone else's work. This book has it all: excellent prose, a gallery of memorable characters, real and complex moral and ethical ponderings, a well-wrought plot with surprising twists and turns, and a clear viewpoint that still allows a fair airing of the opposing view.

**** Alan Russell: *The Hotel Detective,* Mysterious, $18.95. In a cleverly crafted and enormously enjoyable modular mystery, Am Caulfield finds himself thrust into the position of security director and temporary manager of La Jolla's elegant and venerable Hotel California just when a crime wave hits, the infractions ranging from murder to bra theft. Making matters no easier is the presence of a convention of Mystery Weekenders, all of them named Bob Johnson. Russell resolves the various crime problems neatly, but even without the mystery element this could have been a delightful comic novel about the hotel business. One complaint: To fill out the book's length, the author occasionally overdoes the scenery and sentimentality in the last third.

**** Deborah Crombie: *All Shall Be Well,* Scribners, $20. When a terminally-ill neighbor of Scotland Yard's Superintendent Duncan Kincaid dies of a morphine overdose, signs point to murder rather than the victim's once-contemplated suicide. Kincaid enlists partner Sgt. Gemma James, remarkably willing to drop everything and join him on a weekend, in an unofficial investigation. As an American writer of British-set detective novels, Texan Crombie is inevitably bracketed with Martha Grimes and Elizabeth George, but her low-key approach gives her more in common with *real* British writers of quieter, more economical, and usually more satisfying police mysteries.

**** Peter Abrahams: *Lights Out,*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mysterious, $21.95. The situation may be familiar—the framed convict who on his release from prison tries to find out who and what put him there—but the author's treatment of it is anything but, glowing with style, suspense, and originality. Eddie Nye, one-time competitive swimmer who served his full fifteen-year drug smuggling sentence (during which he achieved definitive revenge on three other prisoners who had raped him in the shower), has some amazing adventures and does some genuine detective work in solving the mystery of his own life and trying to work out the meaning of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner." The novel recalls the work of Cornell Woolrich in several ways, including the reader's uncertainty over whether to expect a happy ending.

**** Barbara D'Amato: *Hard Case,* Scribners, $20. The fifth case for Chicago journalist Cat Marsala is set in a hospital trauma center, whose sharp-eyed director was apparently murdered by one of a closed circle of doctors, nurses, and other employees. D'Amato's specialities, well-researched information on a specialized background and a puzzle plot of Golden Age ingenuity and intricacy, make the book almost as good as 1991's *Hardtack.* Traditionalists will especially appreciate how the very last line of the book explains, with unassailable clarity and logic, why one red-herring suspect could not have committed the crime. (The novel's one not-too-serious drawback is that time-honored cliché of romantic fiction: a contrived and extended misunderstanding between the male and female leads that could have been cleared up immediately by minimal communication.)

**** Ellis Peters: *Brother Cadfael's Penance,* Mysterious, $18.95. The twentieth adventure of medieval sleuth Brother Cadfael begins with an even stronger and slower dose of history than usual, with the difference that this time King Stephen and Empress Maud, always talked about, actually appear as characters. Once the story gets rolling, Peters and Cadfael are in top form, with some especially masterful battle scenes and the sensitive touch with father-son relationships also demonstrated in the author's present-day novels about the Felse family. The slim whodunit plot reminds us that the books in the series are increasingly more notable as historical than detective fiction.

*** Michael A. Kahn: *Firm Ambitions,* Dutton, $18.95. The title refers to a trendy health club where the hunky Andros runs exercise classes for affluent St. Louis women. He also makes house calls, a circumstance which leads to his poisoning murder, of which attorney Rachel Gold's sister is accused. Kahn does a brave (and, from my masculine viewpoint, largely successful) job of writing first-person feminine, while providing plenty of laugh-out-loud humor and a good use of the locale, including some historical notes on the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition that fans of the classic musical film *Meet Me in St. Louis* should enjoy. (Remember when Margaret O'Brien asks, "They'll never tear it down, will they?" and grandfather Harry Dav-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

enport replies, "Well, they better not"?) Kahn also sneaks in a tongue-in-cheek homage to fellow St. Louis writer John Lutz.

*** Lindsey Davis: *Poseidon's Gold,* Crown, $22. Marcus Didius Falco, who ventured to Germany for his last case, *The Iron Hand of Mars* (1993), returns to his gritty Roman stamping grounds, much to the book's advantage. When a shady business deal of his late brother Festus threatens the family purse and honor, Falco must join forces with his estranged auctioneer father to seek out the truth. Davis, whose gross details of city life always make me glad I didn't live in ancient Rome, actually describes a meal that sounds appetizing at one point. The puzzle, the scene, the prose, and the characters of Falco and girlfriend Helena Justina make this another winner. My only complaint: I was expecting one more twist that never came. (My historical fiction consultant notes that, as James Melville's lower-class Japanese sometimes talk like cockneys, some of Davis's Romans are given to Yorkshire slang.)

*** James Sallis: *Black Hornet,* Carroll & Graf, $18.95. The author is as distinguished a stylist as reputed, and narrator Lewis Griffin, an intellectual African-American sometime private eye living on the edge in sixties New Orleans, is a formidably complex and admirable figure. The writing and characterization, together with a non-simplistic view of race relations, combine for compelling reading. On the downside, the novel, concerning a serial sniper, is a little short on plot and long on self-indulgent literary references, including a guest appearance by Chester Himes.

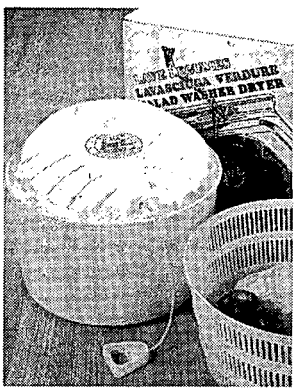
*** Robert A. Carter: *Final Edit,* Mysterious, $18.95. This novel is full of literary references of a different kind as publisher Nicholas Barlow, an old-school New York patrician who often sounds like a Louis Auchincloss character, tries to find out who murdered a successful but widely hated editor for his firm. I doubt many experienced mystery readers will fail to spot the killer, but the smooth and witty first-person narrative and the frequent insights and sidelights on the publishing business will be appreciated by readers attracted to the business side of books.

*** H. R. F. Keating: *Cheating Death,* Mysterious, $18.95. Despite the startling opening sentences, there is not much doubt in the long-time reader's mind about whether Inspector Ghote is actually going to beat his wife Protima. But the theft of an examination paper at Oceanic College, a marginal campus of Bombay University, and the attempted murder of a student accused of selling them provide plenty of problems for the dogged Indian cop. The novel has all the charm expected of the series, but it left at least one question in my mind: Didn't Ghote, between home, office, and the halls of academe, have access to a dictionary?

© 1995 by Jon L. Breen.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

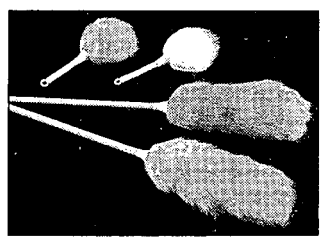


SPIN WASH, SPIN DRY

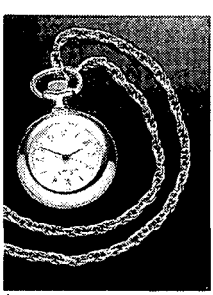
The Jet Spin Washer/Dryer for salad greens and vegetables does a better job with less effort than any other method of preparation. As the stream of water hits the spinning inner basket, it bursts into spray, giving the contents a good soaking before being carried off by centrifugal action. Flywheel action keeps basket spinning with only a few gentle tugs. Spray wash coaxes dirt and grit from innermost lettuce wrinkles. Turn off the faucet and with a few more tugs the remaining water spins away, leaving you with crisp clean salad greens, so dry they are positively perky. Also works for fruits and vegetables. The jet Salad Washer/Dryer is self-draining, splashfree. $23.98 ($4.95) #A1520.

LAMBSWOOL DUSTERS

Lambswool contains a natural static charge that makes dust literally leap off surfaces. This magnetic attraction is just the thing for dusting off bric-a-brac, china, crystal, pictures, anything. Our dusters are imported from England. They are the fluffiest, highest quality lambswool in the world! We offer a set of four lambswool dusters: Our 27" duster, our telescoping duster which extends to more than four feet—lets you reach high corners, top shelves, overhead lights and collapses to 28", and two mini dusters for extra fragile objects. $22.98 ($4.95) #A1870.



POCKET WATCH



This elegant pendant is a reproduction of an antique pocket watch. It has a classic white face, black Roman numerals and even a second hand! The 1⅜" watch suspends from a 30" gold-plated brass chain. Delightful to own or to give! $24.98 ($4.75) #A2069.

TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAILORDER MALL,** Dept. 035 EL ; P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-722-9999.** NJ residents add 6% sales tax. We honor MasterCard/Visa/Discover. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

Magalog Marketing Group Inc.© 1994
1905 Swarthmore Ave., Lakewood, N.J. 08701

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a *NEW* short story by

H. R. F. KEATING

"Keating's most remarkable skill," said William L. DeAndrea in his Encyclopedia Mysteriosa, *"lies in his ability to induce in the most provincial reader an interest in, and sympathy for, characters facing mystery in unusual environments. The best known of these environments is the Bombay of Keating's best-known creation, Inspector Ganesh Ghote." Mr. Keating takes us to Ghote's Bombay in this new story, but with himself instead of Ghote as a central character . . .*

MY FIRST MURDER

by H. R. F. KEATING

I hadn't gone very far from my hotel, walking slowly in the fizzling Bombay heat, when someone came sidling up beside me.

"It is the notable British author?" he said, half a question, half a statement.

He'd got it right. Or, at least, he'd identified me as the person the paper I'd been interviewed in the day before, with picture, had headlined with that typically Indian English phrase.

"Yes?" I answered cautiously.

More than a little cautiously, in fact. There was something about this fellow that set doubts hopping in my mind. More than doubts. Plain distrust. No sooner had he put his question than his glance had flicked away, as if he preferred no one to look at him too closely. Nor was his whole appearance any more reassuring. Check shirt, faintly greasy at neck and cuffs. Cotton khaki trousers with a long dark smear down one thigh. Shoes, rather than sandals, on his sockless feet, their black leather cracked and dry from lack of polish.

© 1995 by H. R. F. Keating.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The only sign of respectability about him, apart from his reasonably good English, was the briefcase he carried. And that was suspiciously thin and empty looking.

But now he turned to me again, two enormous pointy ears poking forward, and flashed me a wide, white-toothed smile.

Too quick a smile?

"You will be very much wanting to know what I am able to tell," he said.

"Oh yes?"

Was money hopefully going to change hands? That what this was all about?

"Yes, yes. You see, I am private eye itself. Junior Investigator. Star of Hind Detective Agency. Soon-soon becoming Senior. Hike of salary also. Star of Hind Agency is full member A.I.S.O.I."

He slid one of a pack of large business cards out of his shirt pocket, thrust it out to me. I took it unwillingly, oily all round the edges as it was with sweaty handling. But before I put it into my own pocket—I could hardly get rid of it at once—I saw at least that it looked like the genuine article.

"But what is this A.I.S—whatever?" I asked, before realising I had given this unsavoury fellow a new toehold.

"It is Association of Investigators and Security Organisation of India. Sahib, I am very much surprised you are not knowing a name of such all-India fame."

Another inch gained in keeping my acquaintance. Hadn't I been put in the position now of having to explain myself? Even apologise?

"Well, you know, I haven't been in India very long. And, writing about my Inspector Ghote, I'm really more interested in the police than—er—private investigators."

I should have left it at that. But, stupidly, I tried for a final brush-off.

"Readers of my books expect rather more than catching out naughty husbands."

"Then, sahib, I must be telling you about time I was committing my first murder."

I gulped.

A murderer? And—And didn't a first imply a second? Even a third? Maybe not a serial killer but, private eye though he might be, someone ready to end a life in the course of robbery? Had he got it into his head that an author from the affluent West was bound to have some huge amount on his person? Under that dirty shirt

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

there could well be a knife. The work of an instant to slip it out, strike, snatch a wallet, melt into the crowd.

I thought fast. Even furiously.

"Er—Yes. Yes, I'd be very interested to hear about—About that. Very. But I imagine you'll want to be paid for such information. Such good information. And, as it so happens, I've left my wallet—Yes, in my hotel."

I began to turn back.

"Oh, sahib, no, no, no. What I am wishing to tell is out of respect only. Respect for one notable author visiting India."

Was that likely?

Well, the fellow's face seemed now to be shining with sincerity. Perhaps I had misjudged him. And it wouldn't be easy to get away without being brutally impolite.

"That's very kind of you. Most kind."

"Oh, very good, sahib. Very good. Here is one damn fine cold-drinks place. We should go in."

I allowed myself to be led into the place—it was called the Edward VIII Juice Nook—and we sat down on either side of one of the narrow tables.

But as my new acquaintance leant forward to lower himself onto his plastic-covered bench, his grease-edged shirt flopped open a little and I saw what could only be the top of a sheath for a knife.

Was I after all going to be one in the series that had begun with that first murder?

No, surely not. A sudden stabbing and a quick grab out in the street was a possibility, but surely not inside here. Surely?

And he might really have a story to tell. Good material.

Once we had been brought our drinks, a Mangola for me, something long, brightly coloured, and sticky-looking called a falooda for my friend, he began his tale. Innocently enough. If you could be innocent telling how, apparently, you had committed a murder. Your first.

"Sahib," he said, bringing those huge pointy ears of his to focus directly at me, "before I am recounting whole damn thing I will make one matter very-very clear. I am altogether good at my job. First class only. Let me give you example."

Could I stop that? Say *Get on to this first murder of yours, that's what I want to hear about.* But no, I couldn't. He had me trapped.

"Sahib, I was once given task by our boss of tracing one girl who had been working for five-six years in prostitution line. She had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

auntie who had married a foreigner, and that fellow had died, leaving said auntie in possession of one lakh rupees. That is a big sum for us, you know."

"Yes, yes."

"Auntie was wishing to make her one and only living relative as heir to all her wealths. But one condition only. She was to give up prostitution racket, even if it was high-class itself."

"Okay, I understand, I understand. So what happened?"

"I was finding and locating that prostitute. Not too hard to do. Ask and ask and before too long you are learning. But question was: Would this prostitute be scared to be found out by hundred-percent-respectable auntie? So what was I doing? Oh, sahib, very-very clever. Under disguise of customer I was booking this girl for night at five-star hotel. I tell you also, sahib, I was very much wishing to do some side-business with her, isn't it?"

Eyes in the ratty face opposite rolled and rolled.

"But I was not at all attempting same. Payment in advance was company money. What would I be able to say in my report? So duty was calling and I was just only chit-chatting that girl. I gave out I was one damn-good fortuneteller. Then straightaway she was asking me to read her palm. And I was telling her her own history, which I was all the time damn well knowing from what Auntie had told. You have just only one female relative not seen for many-many years, I told. Correct, correct, she was answering. Next I was saying her palm told this auntie was rich, rich lady. Good, good, she was replying. So at last I was asking what would feelings be if fate brought her to meet this lady. Very fine, very fine, was her answer."

My friend leant back and burst into loud brays of laughter. I looked round in embarrassment. But no one in the little place seemed to be taking much notice.

"You know what was happening when Auntie was saying she would give and bequeath to this prostitute one lakh rupees?" my acquaintance plunged on when at last he had brought himself to stop laughing. "No? You are not at all able to guess. But I will tell. Prostitute was saying: In one night I am making rupees fifteen-hundred, half to my boss, but still more in one year than you are offering as total, Auntie. So goodbye and back to foreign."

More brays of raucous laughter.

"But you were going to tell me about a murder," I broke in exasperatedly. "Your first murder."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He leant across the narrow table towards me. A strong whiff of mingled falooda sweetness and sheer bad breath.

"Yes, yes. Well, I had thought that day was going to be a good day for me itself. When I was reporting for duty I was finding I had not been assigned some hard-work, no-fun job. What we are calling market survey. Number Two product being sold under false tiptop trademark. Keeping one close watch on shop until you are seeing supplier come, and then follow-following until you are able to track down entire organisation. No, no. That day it was erring-wife job."

Across the table I was given an appalling leer.

"Such I am always liking best. When it is matter of seeing with own eyes moment of hanky-panky itself. So I was setting off with what we are calling keyhole camera in briefcase. No bugging apparatus, you understand, because such is illegal under Indian Wireless and Telegraphic Act, nineteen thirty-three."

"Very commendable, but—"

"Yes, yes. So I was watching until lady in question would come out of husband's posh flat, Malabar Hill. After some time I saw their driver take car from garage and sit waiting for memsahib. At once I was securing taxi to be hundred percent ready to follow. In five-ten minutes Madam was coming. Then I in my taxi was trailing-trailing until we were reaching building at Marine Lines. There, as previously ascertained by my co-colleague, was staying Madam's good friend known by the name of Laxmi. But what colleague had not at all considered was the block was having side exit also. But I in my taxi went, quick-quick, round corner, and in one minute, yes, please, Madam was coming out and waving-waving for taxi herself."

Hands rubbed vigorously together in delight.

I began to think I had wasted the price of a Mangola and a falooda.

"To Colaba, Madam was going, just only where we are now. Myself following, promise-promising money to my taxiwalla. Here in Colaba, Madam was hurry-scurrying down some lane and into one Class-Two hotel. Five-ten minutes I was giving her, and then I was going in there also. Rupees five to fellow at Reception, and he was telling which room she had gone to and that also Mister was there in advance. Very good, very good."

He tapped his tall glass sharply on the table. I was already aware it had been drained to the last dreg. The prolonged sucking sound had not been very agreeable.

Ah, well, I thought, might as well hear the end of the story. One more falooda won't break the bank.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A long sticky swallow of the new tall glass and he was off again.

"Oh, you would have liked to see what I was seeing, sahib, when I was putting eye to keyhole. By twisting-twisting I was able to see bed itself. Lady's sari hanging down from end. Madam one hundred percent invisible. Underneath big-big gentleman. Big-big bottom up and down, up and down. Like pile driver only. By God, I was so damn interested I was nearly forgetting my bounden duty."

Yes, yes, you squitty little horror. Get on with it. Your sordid details are never going to form part of an Inspector Ghote investigation. But this murder . . . your first.

"You are liking-liking this story, yes? Then I am telling Part Two. At last, you understand, I was remembering keyhole camera. You know, what you must be getting in my line always is photographic evidence. Damn fool husbands never willing to believe naughty-naughty lady's doings without evidence of own blasted eyes."

"I dare say."

"But then— Oh, sahib, sahib, damn-damn shame."

"No film in your camera?"

Not a very nice thing to say, but I felt I was owed it.

"No, no, sahib. Not at all, not at all. I was telling, isn't it, I am damn good operator. Always check-checking."

"I'm sure you are. It was just that you said something was a shame."

"Yes, yes. Two hundred percent shame. You must be knowing keyhole camera is able to take shot just only directly in front. And that bed with the up-down bottom going and going was not in exact straight line with door. I myself was able to see funny goings-on. Yes, yes. But I was able somewhat to wriggle round. Camera, no."

He took a long swallow at his second falooda. Perhaps for consolation.

"But this murder . . ." I prompted.

Once more I could not help glancing at the tip of the leather sheath under my friend's shirt.

"Yes, yes, I am coming to murder only. But it is important-important you should first be acquainted with each and every detail of beforehand. Or you would not be understanding whole damn affair."

"No? Well, go on then."

"So after looking and looking through what they are calling viewfinder— You are knowing viewfinder?"

"Yes, yes."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, at last I was having very-very quietly, you understand, to open door two-three inches and try for shot from changed angle. Perhaps better. Face of Madam now visible. One expression, utmost delight."

"Yes, yes. But what happened?"

"Oh, sahib, bloody disaster. You see, at that moment Mister Big-Behind was turning face in that direction also. And, even if Madam was so enjoying she was having no eyes for door opening just only one crack, Mister was different kettle-fish to one hundred percent."

I began to hope my peeping friend had got the thumping he deserved. But when was this first murder of his coming in?

"Yes, I can see you were in big trouble," I said, by way of urging him on.

"Oh, sahib, you are not at all knowing how much of troubles I was in."

"No?"

"No, no, sahib. You see, when I was observing whole of that man, just only as he was jumping off the bed, off lady also, I was at once seeing who it was. And, sahib, then I was knowing real-real disaster was there."

"Why was that?"

"Sahib, perhaps, coming from foreign, you are not even knowing name of Bombay Number One top smuggler. Sahib, it is Munna Thakur. Thakur Dada, we are calling him. Famous-famous. Name in papers each and every day. Police very much respecting. And bad also. Bad-bad-bad."

"And he had seen you? Is that it?"

"Oh yes, sahib. He had damn well seen all right. And I also had seen, I had seen he was not once ever going to forget this face."

Well, I thought, as a face it's not exactly prepossessing. But with those two great big pointy ears, you're right, my friend, it's certainly memorable.

"Yes, I suppose you must have felt you were in a pretty tight corner. Did you manage to do anything about it? Or are you still trying to dodge—what did you call him?—Thakur Dada?"

"Oh no, sahib. Altogether okay now. I was telling, it is my first murder."

"You mean you murdered him? This top smuggler? Feared by the police even? But didn't he have a gang? Bodyguards? What do you call them? *Goondas.*"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes, yes. He was having. Many-many tough-tough *goondas*. That was why I was needing to act damn quick. I was just only lucky the gentleman was in state of undress itself."

"Yes, I suppose he could hardly chase you out into the street."

"Correct, correct. But I tell you, he was into a trouser and out of that hotel room even before I had run down each and every stair."

"He chased you then? Was he armed at all?"

"Oh yes, sahib. A gentleman like Thakur Dada is always carrying a gun. He was waving and waving same as he ran after me along lane going towards Colaba Causeway."

"But I suppose he couldn't fire at you? Not in a lane crowded with people?"

"Oh, sahib, such would not have stopped Thakur Dada. If he had been able, he would have put bullets three-four into myself, and walk off laughing only."

"But wouldn't the passersby have set on him? Held him until the police came?"

"Sahib, it was Thakur Dada there."

"Really? He has that much power, does he?"

I was beginning to wonder if, after all, I might be learning something to put into some future book. To show your hero in a really good light you need a villain of real stature.

"Oh, sahib. Thakur Dada cannot be touched."

"Cannot? So he's still there? After you?"

"No, no, sahib. I should have been saying *He could not be touched.*"

"Then it was him that you— Who was the— The victim of your first murder?"

"*Ji haan,* sahib."

It was clear only his own language would do to make that claim. *Ji haan:* Yes, indeed.

"But how? How did you manage to—to murder a man like that?"

"Sahib, I will tell you. But you only. Because I have such respect for notable British author."

"That—That's very kind. Well, thank you. Thank you."

"Sahib, this is what was happening. Truly. There I was, running and running, and thinking with each and every step Thakur Dada is there. He would wipe me out just only like I would slap one mosquito. And he is big-big and I am small-small itself. In two-three minutes I will be feeling his big-big hands round my throat. What to do? What to do?"

"What did you do?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My heart had begun to pound almost as thumpingly as my friend's must have done.

"Oh, sahib, at that moment, just as I was coming into Colaba Causeway itself. Sahib, just outside here, going straight-straight from Prince of Wales Museum to utmost tip of Bombay."

"Yes, yes. I've been here before. Very crowded. Traffic hooting and honking everywhere."

"Very good, sahib. Well, just as I reached, I was seeing a fellow with a handcart selling mangoes. Hundred percent rotten fruit. Cheap, cheap. And idea was coming to me that if I was taking one of those baskets and tipping same on ground, perhaps Thakur Dada would be slipping and sliding and falling down to his very face."

"Good thinking. And it came off? You got away?"

Could I use that trick in a Ghote story? There were times when I had him chased by *goondas* and outnumbered. But this seemed a little too good to be true.

As it turned out to be.

"Sahib, I was not so clever as that. And also if I had got away that time, how long would it be before one dark night I was meeting four-five *goondas* and coming to my very end?"

"So, what happened?"

"What was happening was that this mangowalla was not at all liking some passing individual seizing his basket, however much of rotten were his fruits."

"So . . . ?"

"And colliding also with Thakur Dada."

"So that put an end to the chase, I suppose. But surely it can't have been what saved you?"

"No, no, sahib. But, you see, this mangowalla was coming out fast, impact was sending Thakur Dada, who was dancing here and there so as not to slide on those fruits, falling-sprawling right into roadway."

"Yes?"

"And, sahib, bus was passing. Number One Limited, very much of nonstop."

I admit I felt a tumbling sense of anticlimax. So this first murder was no murder at all. I suppose I should have been glad to find I was not sitting opposite a killer—he had just drained his second falooda, every bit as noisily—but somehow at that moment I felt distinctly cheated.

"And then you ran off?" I said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Sahib, no, no, no. What good would be there? If the fellows of Thakur Dada's gang were finding out who had caused death of their hero, then once more I would be in big-big soup."

"I suppose you would be. So you didn't run off? Is that it?"

My big-eared friend sat up straighter and gave me a look of terribly greasy cockiness.

"No problem, sahib, no problem."

"I would have thought—"

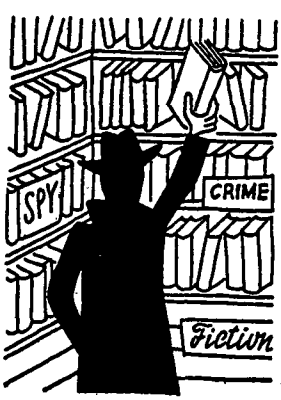
"Sahib, I was seeing out of corner of eye what had happened. So at once, quick-quick, I was running back. I was taking out this knife I have." He flicked open his shirt, and I saw to my surprise that his long leather sheath actually contained nothing. "Sahib, you must be knowing that private eye is sometimes needing one weapon only. And, sahib, I was at once kneeling down and plunging same deep-deep into body of Thakur Dada and leaving there."

"But why did you do that? Wasn't he dead? Or what?"

"Oh, sahib, yes. Dead-dead. But that knife was having on it my name. So in not much of time entire Bombay was knowing who had disposed of Thakur Dada. Who had the daring to do it. So now no one will do anything against me. They are damn well knowing, if so, they are facing Murder Number Two."

I looked at my friend.

No, I thought, no. I don't really believe Inspector Ghote is ever going to have to solve the case of the serial-killer private eye.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a *NEW* short story by

JO BANNISTER

Jo Bannister is as clever as they come with the twist-in-the-tail short story. For those interested in trying her longer fiction, St. Martin's Press has a new novel due out in May entitled A Taste for Burning, *and her previous Book,* Charisma, *published by St. Martin's last autumn, is available in bookstores . . .*

THE WATCHERS

by JO BANNISTER

It didn't look much like a witch's cottage. For one thing, it wasn't in the middle of a deep dark wood at the end of a winding path overhung with cockle, spurge, dead nettles, and Old Man's Beard. A witch living in Colliers Row would have to take two buses to anywhere you could pick ingredients for even a very modest spell, to cure boils on a cat, for instance. A love potion for a tax inspector would involve a longer journey than that.

For another thing, the curtains at the parlour window were yellow gingham and the sill was decorated with a collection of china pigs. All right, so maybe modern witches prefer not to advertise their presence with plum velvet and wax effigies; still, there was something distinctly nonoccult about yellow gingham and china pigs.

Denzil Boswell and Geordie Baker passed Colliers Row going to and from work each day—Denzil at a hardware store, Geordie as an apprentice butcher—so the cottage was part of their local scenery. You might think they would long ago have stopped noticing it; but no. Hardly a day went past without one of them cracking some joke about it or crossing his fingers to ward off the evil eye. This they did with great hilarity and hoots of mirth, without realising that such obsessive derision was only another way of paying respect

© 1995 by Jo Bannister.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to the myth. Two young men who really thought it was nonsense would have talked about something else..

"Did you ever see her?" Denzil asked once. "My mum says she's all shrivelled and wrinkled, and ninety if she's a day."

"Your mum thinks everybody's shrivelled and wrinkled unless they go through turnstiles sideways." It was true. Mrs. Boswell came from Jamaica, where anybody worth a row of beans is expected to have at least two chins.

"My mum says she was a famous witch in Haiti but she had to leave. Something to do with an army officer's son and a goat."

Geordie stared. "What—she turned him into one?"

"Turned him into one, married him to one—something like that." Denzil affected a nonchalance he didn't altogether feel. The West Indian blood in his veins was significantly diluted by the Tyneside steelrigger who had been his father, but the spirit of the islands sends out long fingers, and at times like these he could feel them stirring in his hair.

Denzil's mother was a dévout Christian and knew voodoo for the work of the Devil. If asked, she would say she'd told her children about mambos and houngans as an awful warning. But the truth was that Mrs. Boswell was a natural storyteller, that she sometimes missed the vibrant colours and fevered passions of home, and that the violent erotic activities of the voodoo pantheon—of Damballah the snake god and Erzulie the temptress and Baron Samedi the lord of the underworld—sent a delectable shiver up the spine if related with sufficient enthusiasm over a well-made fire on a cold northern night.

So though Denzil Boswell considered himself a modern urban Englishman, rational and pragmatic, there was something about the idea of a voodoo witch living two streets away that teased and intrigued him.

"Our Joyce"—Geordie's sister worked in the supermarket— "says she wears gold jewellery all the time, big earrings and bangles and things, and pulls out wads of notes to buy a tin of dog food."

"What's she called?" All Denzil could remember was that it was something long, complicated, and foreign.

Geordie didn't know either. He shrugged. "Something Froggy."

Her name was Clarice Erzulie Tituba Vincour, and she was somewhere in her ninth decade. Even she wasn't quite sure where: public records in Haiti at the beginning of the century fell somewhat short of Somerset House standards. She had lived in England for more

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

than forty years and if she, like Mrs. Boswell, missed the warmth and spontaneity of the West Indies, she didn't miss the way people in authority could make your life a misery if they took against you. And it was such a little goat, and any fair-minded person would have said it was hers and not the army officer's son's to start with. Well, probably.

So she fled Port au Prince and came to England as housekeeper to a cousin's brother-in-law, a widowed shopkeeper. Clarice looked after him until he died, when, having no children, he left her the little house in Colliers Row and enough money to see her through her own old age.

Though this closing phase of her life was lasting longer than either of them had expected. Fortunately Clarice had ways to boost her savings over and above the rate of inflation. There were advantages in being seen as a practitioner of the old arts.

She didn't practice much now: partly because of her age, more because of the age they lived in. People today, you threaten to put a hex on them, they laugh in your face. You threaten to take their duppy, they think you're talking about something you buy in a pet shop.

Still, there were worse places in the world for a woman to grow old without family, without friends, with just a bit of money to keep the wolf from her door.

Until the night she was snoozing in the old bentwood rocking chair by the embers of the parlour fire and woke with a start to hear someone opening the kitchen door.

The thought of the old witch, shrivelled and wrinkled and shunning the world except for rare occasions when she went shopping with a wad of notes, filled Denzil Boswell's thoughts more and more. He thought about her while stacking galvanised buckets, while weighing out nails, while decanting white spirit, and when he went home at night he dreamed of her. What else did she keep in that little house, behind the gingham curtains? Were there effigies and lambs' hearts stuck with thorns? Was there a black cat that suckled from a nipple in her armpit?

And the money: How much was there? She was a very old woman, she was probably deaf, you could probably hammer her down with a twelve-pound maul and not wake her. He would dearly love to see the effigies, and if he were to find her hoard of witch's gold she probably wouldn't miss a little of it. She probably didn't know how much she had.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Denzil thought he could get into her house easily enough. The back door gave onto a small yard reached from an alley running behind the row, just like his mother's house; and just like his mother, she probably forgot to lock it half the time. He could be in and out without her even knowing, with a handful of gold and one of those effigies to show Geordie the next day. Geordie was a bit law-abiding at times, but stealing from a witch wasn't like stealing, it was more like proving yourself. A rite of passage.

In the end he'd thought about it so long, in such detail, that it became inevitable. If doing it proved him a man, what did failing to do it prove? So late one night, when his mother was asleep, he crept out by their own back door—unlocked, naturally; one day they'd have burglars—and slipped along the alleys to Colliers Row.

It was a strange frame of mind in which he found himself: at once elated and afraid, eager to get there and aching to get home, proud of himself and also ashamed. But this wasn't about how he felt, it was about what he did. And he was going to take some witch's gold, just to show that he could.

It was an ominously dark night: low clouds, no stars. He'd come by the back alleys to avoid being seen—his mum would kick up a stink if she ever heard what he'd been up to—but it was an unnecessary precaution. In dark clothes, with his middling-dark colouring, he was as hard to spot as a prowling cat.

The house with the yellow curtains was the last in Colliers Row, so it didn't take much counting on his fingers to work out which was the right yard. The yard gate was latched but not bolted: Denzil let himself in with only a little creak from an unoiled hinge. It was enough to stop his heart for a beat or two but nobody else could have heard it.

The back door was indeed unlocked. His blood raced. If he'd been wrong about that, if the witch had put her cat out and locked up last thing like sensible people, he'd have had to go home. Now he had to go on. He let himself into the kitchen and groped his way around the familiar layout to the parlour door. All these little houses were built the same, but he was taken aback by the smell, which was strange, musky and spicy. The smell of the islands, he supposed, though he'd never been there. His mother's cooking inclined more to meat and two veg.

The parlour smelled odd too: a dry, dusty, powdery smell he could almost but not quite identify. Also there was the smell of clinker from the embers of a fire. A couple of glowing coals and the glimmer

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

through the gingham curtains of a distant streetlamp—all the nearer ones having been broken—was the only light in the room. It wasn't enough to see the hand in front of his face. He stood just inside the door, breathing unsteadily, getting his bearings.

Close at hand a voice—a strange voice, ancient and creaking as the hinge outside, a voice with an accent like the singing in his mother's church—said, "Stay where you are, child. The baron is watching you."

Denzil's heart pounded as if it would come out through his ears. But he did as she said. That was what that strange powdery smell was: the smell of old ladies. She was here in the dark room with him: the witch who never slept. Who turned army officers' sons into goats.

He stammered, "The baron?"

"Baron Samedi," she croaked in the terrible darkness, and then he understood. Those dreadful tales of his mother's that brought the incense of Caribbean nights and passions to the backstreets of Tyneside came back to him, years after he had last thought of them. Baron Samedi, chief of the evil Petro gods; also known as Baron Cimetièrre and Baron Crois. Not a nice chap. Not a nice chap at all.

And, of course, entirely mythical. Denzil drew a deep breath, forced his shoulders back, straightened to his full height. Did this mad old woman really think she could scare him with a Haitian bogeyman? Even if he'd felt inclined to believe in gods and demons, which he did not, surely there was a question of jurisdiction? Gods are like wines: not all of them travel well.

"A witch?" he snorted, with perhaps a shade more bravado than he felt. "There's no such thing!"

"I never said there was," she retorted calmly. "I just said you should keep still while the baron has his eyes on you. You don't want to upset the baron; oh no indeed."

Denzil's fingers were groping along the wall for a light switch; then he realised that, even if he wanted to see her, he didn't want her to see him. His hand dropped to his side. "There's nobody here, old woman. Just you and me, and in a minute there'll just be you."

"Stay where you are," she said again, her musical voice hardening. "The baron's gettin' upset now. You gotta be nice to Clarice. Respectful."

"Who?" He was thinking. She's old and alone, and if she has a cane to defend herself with that's the most she'll have. I can walk

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

out of here any time I want. Hell, I can bundle her under the stairs and take a proper look round, and she can do damn-all to stop me. He wondered why he was even bothering to talk to her.

"Me," she snapped irritably. "Clarice Erzulie Tituba Vincour. Miss."

Denzil laughed out loud. "Clarice Erzulie Tituba Vincour? Lady, that's a hell of a name for a crazy old Haitian woman!"

"What you know, child?" she demanded, her rusty voice soaring angrily. "What you know about Haiti? What you know about me? You know nothin'. Nothin'!"

He felt oddly piqued by her disdain. "I know about your crazy gods—about Baron Samedi. The lord of Saturday. Also known as the lord of the cemetery and the lord of the cross. The chief of the Petro gods in the voodoo pantheon." He'd impressed himself; it remained to be seen if he'd impressed her.

Perhaps he had, because when she spoke again her voice was softer. "You know all that? Somebody given you a good education once. Pity to waste it robbing old ladies."

"Old ladies who produce wads of money at supermarkets deserve to be robbed. Tell me where it is. I won't take it all."

"You won't take any of it," Miss Vincour corrected him robustly. "Not while I got Baron Samedi to guard it."

Denzil was getting cross. He hadn't come here to hurt anyone, didn't see himself as a mugger of pensioners, but she was getting on his nerves with all her mumbo jumbo. He started to say, "Clarice, you say that one more time—"

Then in the darkness he felt a gust of hot air move across the back of his hand and heard a soft, inhuman, panting, chuckling sound. It froze him to the marrow of his bones.

Clarice chuckled too, an old dry chuckle like breaking sticks. "I guess you're going to tell me now that Baron Samedi's a hell of a name for a Rottweiler."

In the darkness, close by Denzil's leg, the panting turned to a growl.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a *NEW* short story by

MONICA QUILL

Sister Mary Teresa Dempsey was conceived by her creator Ralph McInerny (writing under the pseudonym Monica Quill) along the lines of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe—"what Nero Wolfe might have been like if he had taken the veil." She has been entertaining readers since 1981, when Not a Blessed Thing!, *the first novel to feature her, was published . . .*

DEATH TAKES THE VEIL

by MONICA QUILL

1.

Sylvia Corrigan had been an actress in college, on stage, in the classroom, everywhere, until acting became indistinguishable from living. In interviews, she would go on about it, suggesting that the journalist posing the questions was also playing a role.

"I watch you," she would say, her famous green eyes narrowing, making a gesture that seemed fraught with significance, "and already I covet your role. I want to play it. How long have you been with *Newsweek?*"

And, as the abashed reporter later wrote, that quickly they exchanged roles, Sylvia questioning, the reporter answering. Two days later, the profile Sylvia had written arrived in the journalist's mail.

Such precocity—Sylvia called it genius, but considered genius a fate rather than an accomplishment—while at first eliciting amazement and praise, had a way of cloying quickly. One role Sylvia had never mastered was that of friend. A friend after all must be constant.

Nearly twenty years ago, an alumna who was in films, informed of the young Sylvia's talent, had come to the college production of

© 1995 by Monica Quill.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Lady's Not for Burning and told Sister Mary Teresa Dempsey that the student actress's future was assured. Emtee Dempsey had wondered even then if this were good luck or bad. She had wondered the same thing about the closing of the college. The property had been sold off, and only a remnant of the Order of Martha and Mary (the M&M's) remained, lodged in a wonderful house on Walton Street designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, gift of yet another grateful alumna. Former students kept in touch, bringing their troubles and triumphs to Emtee Dempsey, and she came to relish the role of wise old friend. She was surprised, therefore, to be told by Joyce of Sylvia's appearance on *Oprah.*

"Sylvia is in Chicago?"

"She's going to play Antigone. Only a short engagement because she's scheduled to make a film. An adaptation from a French writer. George Bananas?"

"Bernanos," Emtee Dempsey said. No error of fact ever went uncorrected in her presence.

"About some Carmelite martyrs."

"A tremendous play!" Emtee Dempsey said. "Do you know it, Sister Kimberly? *The Dialogues of the Carmelites.*" .

Kim, the third of the trio of M&M's in residence on Walton Street, was a graduate student in history at Northwestern but, more importantly—at least, it consumed more of her time—research assistant to Sister Mary Teresa, who was writing a massive history of the twelfth century.

"No, I haven't."

"You'll find it on that shelf there." She rose a little behind the desk in her study. Unlike the younger women, Emtee Dempsey always wore the traditional habit of the order as decreed by the foundress, Blessed Abigail Keineswegs. The headdress gave the impression of a gull landing, the wimple was a large starched affair, the robe black, the cincture white. She had yet to hear a convincing argument why nuns should dress like other women. To remove barriers? Perhaps there should be barriers. In any case, Emtee Dempsey had never felt under any handicap wearing her eighteenth-century garb. She was an internationally recognized medieval historian and the one teacher no student was ever likely to forget.

"You can read it aloud to me."

"In French?"

"It will be good practice." She added, in belated and not wholly sincere self-deprecation, "For my ear."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The old nun had little doubt that Sylvia Corrigan would visit Walton Street. She visited whenever she came to Chicago. In that at least she was like other alumnae.

"Do we have that thing she drinks? White wine and . . . "

"Crème de cassis," Joyce said. "It's called Kir."

"Not an ungrateful one, I hope. She may want to stay for dinner."

It turned out that Sylvia wanted a good deal more than that. She wanted to live with them.

Her telephone call came while Emtee Dempsey was still thinking of things Sylvia would want when she visited. Now she was able to ask their expected guest what they could do to make her visit more enjoyable. Emtee Dempsey would have indignantly denied that the prominence of her former student played any part in the fuss she made over her, but she seemed to follow Sylvia's career with unusual interest.

"Just a cell like any of yours," Sylvia said in rare tones. Her voice, like her manner, had the ability to assume different pitches, accents, pronunciations. It was hard to know what persona Sylvia had adopted. "I will live according to your schedule, go to chapel with you, everything. Is there a copy of the rule?"

"Why don't you simply take the veil, Sylvia?"

"That is precisely what I shall be doing."

A nun for the nonce, that is. Sylvia could assume, as an actress, an indefinite number of lifetime commitments. But in real life the only role she could no longer play was that of Sylvia Corrigan.

"I am a blank piece of paper. A role has to be written on me."

She had never married. There were equivocal references to her liaison with Carlos Bonifacio, an Argentine whose career flourished in both North and Latin America. He would be appearing with her in the film adaptation of Bernanos's play.

"I want to be a nun," Sylvia said.

Being a nun was not as definite a thing as it once had been. Bernanos's Carmelites would recognize the Carmelites of today, but such minor orders as that founded by Abigail Keineswegs had undergone profound upheavals and faced total extinction. Sylvia's impression of the M&M's would have been formed at college, however, and even so short a time ago as that they had been numerous, disciplined, distinctive. Sylvia's motive in inviting herself, given these changes, led to predictable difficulties when Sylvia arrived.

On previous occasions she had been brought to the door in a limousine and so quickly did her entourage produce a crowd that her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

passage from car to door was a royal one, as she threw kisses to the fans, touched an outstretched hand here and there, refused autographs. On this visit, when Kim went to the door she found a waif. Hair pulled back in a ponytail, wearing jeans and sweatshirt, tennis shoes, a pea jacket, Sylvia carried one airline bag. The famous green eyes were the giveaway.

"Sylvia?"

Two abrupt nods and then, chin on her chest, looking at the floor, she said, "Sister Mary Teresa is expecting me."

If the actress had been trouble before in all the glory of stardom, she was in this incarnation an infinitely more demanding guest. She wanted to dress like Sister Mary Teresa.

"I don't think any of my habits would fit you, child."

Sylvia turned to Kim. She clearly disapproved of Kim's Oxford gray suit and polka-dot blouse. Joyce came in to see the celebrity and was surprised to find her sartorial twin.

"One of you can lend me a habit, can't you?"

"Not me," Joyce said. "We voted not to wear it and that was good enough for me."

"You don't even own one?"

Kim and Joyce confessed that they did not.

"But Sister Mary Teresa . . ."

"One could retain the traditional habit if one desired, Sylvia. I, of course, chose not to change."

"I must wear a habit. It's no good if I just dress like anyone else. Nuns should look like nuns."

Emtee Dempsey beamed at such sound doctrine. "Indeed. But the important thing is to be what one seems."

"I'll have one made."

"Better order a Carmelite habit, Sylvia. It's what you'll be wearing in the film."

Sylvia agreed and looked to the window. Was she thinking she should have chosen a Carmelite convent in which to accustom herself to her role?

"Show me where I'll be staying, let me take a copy of your rule, and I'll go get a habit. Theatrical costume suppliers should have what I want."

It was Kim's idea that Sylvia take the apartment in the basement which would give her privacy and where there was a television.

Sylvia shuddered. "No television. My Carmelites did not have television."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kim showed Sylvia to a room on the second floor whose lack of austerity disappointed her.

"Let me see Sister Mary Teresa's room." Sylvia was whispering.

In Emtee Dempsey's room was a single bed, a chair, a prie-dieu.

"This is what I want!" Sylvia cried. Kim promised to reduce the guest room to the same uncluttered condition and Sylvia called a cab and was off to find a habit.

Emtee Dempsey was at work in her study, so Kim went into the kitchen for a cup of coffee.

"Did you ever dress up as a nun when you were a kid?" Joyce asked.

"When I was a kid, becoming a nun was the furthest thing from my mind." Encountering Emtee Dempsey had planted the seed of her vocation.

"Just asking. Neither did I. All the girls I knew who dressed up as nuns got over it by the time they were teenagers."

"Are you suggesting the reverse is true?"

"If the habit fits . . ."

Sylvia had come to the house at two-thirty; she had left again shortly after three. The idea was that she would be back in no time. But an hour went by, two hours, and then it was six o'clock, and no Sylvia Corrigan.

"Where has she been staying, I wonder?" Emtee Dempsey said.

Joyce said, "I could call *Oprah.*"

But the talk show had no idea what hotel Sylvia had gone to on arriving in Chicago. So all they could do was wait.

They delayed supper until seven and then went ahead, but it was a joyless meal with three sets of ears cocked to hear the doorbell or at least the phone. They had still not heard from Sylvia when the time for night prayers came and the three went silently to chapel for compline.

That night Kim did not sleep, certain that this strange development must be keeping Sister Mary Teresa awake, but in the morning, on the way to Mass at the cathedral, the old nun said she had slept like a top. She did not mention Sylvia.

Sylvia was not mentioned at breakfast either, and afterward, in the study, Emtee Dempsey looked at a note on her desk.

"I was going to ask you to bring me Molnar's book on Bernanos, but I suppose we can let that wait."

"What do you suppose happened?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I have no idea." And then her eyes looked at Kim through round gold-rimmed glasses. "But I don't like it. I don't like it at all."

Before Kim set out for the university, the phone rang. It was her brother Richard, a detective on the Chicago police department, full of early morning cheer. "You're not missing a nun, are you, Kim?"

"Don't be funny."

"Just checking. There's one in the morgue, all dressed up in the old habit, and we can't find where she belongs."

"In the morgue?"

"That's where we put dead nuns when we find them sitting around in public places."

"Richard, listen. Sister Mary Teresa and I will leave for the morgue immediately. Meet us there."

"Do you know who it is?"

Kim hesitated. "I can't say. Will you be there?"

"Look Kim, I don't have time. . . ."

"Richard Moriarity!"

"You sound like Mom. Okay. I'll be there."

"Where is the morgue, Richard?"

Emtee Dempsey listened in silence as Kim told her of Richard's call. She rose in silence from her chair, took her cane, and thumped down the hall toward the front door. Wedged into the passenger seat of the battered VW bug, she rode in silence as Kim headed for the address Richard had given her.

Kim knew the old nun approved what she had done and the swiftness with which she had decided. But neither of them wanted to speculate. It was too dreadful, too bizarre a possibility. Yet it would have been impossible not to make the connection after what Richard had said. How many nuns in traditional costume are there anymore?

Richard was standing impatiently on the steps, squinting in the autumn sunlight, anxious to get this over with. He hustled them right into the viewing room, asked Emtee Dempsey if she could see the monitor all right, then called through to the attendant.

The body was shown as it had been found, clothed in a religious habit. The face looked fuller because of the headdress. The profile was unmistakable, but Emtee Dempsey asked, "What color are the eyes?"

"Green," came the answer.

Kim had turned away when the televised hand moved to open the dead woman's eyes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"There's no doubt, Richard. That is the body of Sylvia Corrigan."

He looked at her, he looked at Kim, he began to smile, and then grew stern.

"Sylvia Corrigan, the actress?"

"That's right. She's an alumna of the college. She visited us yesterday in midafternoon. She intended to spend some time with us on Walton Street."

"But she's dressed as a nun."

"She's an actress," Emtee Dempsey said.

He decided that was enigmatic enough to serve as an explanation. He took another look at the two of them, as if hoping to surprise some clue that they were kidding him, then went into action on the phone.

Sister Mary Teresa stood for a moment, looking at the face that still appeared on the screen, and her mouth moved in prayer. When she was through, she said, "Let's go back to the house."

The return drive was silent but for one remark of the old nun. "She was going to play a nun who was killed. As usual, she entered into the role completely."

2.

Sylvia Corrigan's death was a journalistic sensation and not even Emtee Dempsey had it in her to blame the media for their treatment of it. What else could one expect in a post-Christian age? As nuns became less numerous, they acquired box-office appeal. Movies, plays, novels of a sort, appeared in incredible numbers, playing the changes on the Maria Monk legends of yore. The old nun's considered judgment was that as a group they had been treated with excessive respect in the past and this was God's way of righting the balance. Our Lord, too, she reminded Kim and Joyce, had come to a bad end in a worldly sense. That an actress of Sylvia Corrigan's renown should be found dead in a nun's habit in a Chicago hotel stimulated the jaded pens of journalists from coast to coast. A persistent theory was that she had really been a nun all along.

"You will not read such nonsense in the *Tribune,*" Katherine Senski fumed, her sherry dipping from rim to rim in her glass, though she did not spill a drop. "Can you imagine! They actually believe a nun could be an actress."

Emtee Dempsey did not share Katherine's indignation. It was not often that these old warriors were at odds, but this was one of those times. Katherine, in the same decade of her life as Emtee Dempsey,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was the doyenne of Chicago journalism, and still active. She had been a trustee of the college and fought its closing at Emtee Dempsey's side. Defeat had brought them even closer together and Katherine was a frequent visitor on Walton Street.

"I shall never understand you," she said impatiently, after Emtee Dempsey's account of the singer who joined a convent in the Bois de Boulogne with the result that half of Paris filled the chapel during Holy Week when the former diva sang.

"Let us forget generalities about the degree of disrespect now shown the religious life and speak of the case before us," Emtee Dempsey said. Sylvia had been strangled. This had not been immediately apparent because the ugly results had been covered by her wimple.

"A fastidious murderer," Katherine said.

"How do you mean?"

"Concealing what he did."

"Indeed." Emtee Dempsey looked at Kim. She might have been asking her not to reveal how she'd had to work every item out of Richard by wiles, by food and drink, and the promise that she would not, for once in her life, interfere in police business. "From what Richard tells us, she could not have been wearing the habit when she was strangled."

"Good heavens!"

"I am not sure Richard and the police realize that."

"Are you suggesting she was dressed up in the habit only after she was killed?"

"I am. And then left sitting in a chair in the hotel mezzanine."

Katherine finished her sherry and held out the empty glass to Kim. "Sister, please. Every death is terrible, but to think that we are talking of Sylvia Corrigan."

The premiere alumna of the college, that is, and a person of whom they had been so proud for so long. Before Kim left the room, Katherine asked Emtee Dempsey if she had met Raoul St.-Loup, the theatrical agent and publicist.

"My dear, that is why you were invited. I am expecting him tonight."

Raoul St.-Loup did not pretend that he took worthless clay and molded it into a celebrity. All of his clients had already attained some claim on public attention before he represented them. He would not have taken them on otherwise. But it was his boast that every client of his received the full benefit of his own considerable

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

abilities and that each had achieved as much celebrity as he or she was capable of, or, in some cases, wanted. Sylvia Corrigan had been a promising actress when he took her on; within a few years she was a star in the theatrical firmament. Let his enemies make of that what they would.

"I am devastated by what has happened," he sighed, when they were settled in the living room, Emtee Dempsey in her high-back brocade chair, Katherine and St.-Loup on one of the couches flanking the fireplace, Kim across from them. St.-Loup brought the long fingers of one hand to his forehead as he spoke, revealing a thick gold chain on his right wrist. There was another at his neck, visible because of his open collar—actually, his shirt was unbuttoned to such an extent that the luxuriant hair on his chest was all too visible. What he wore could not be called a suit. The cut of the coat was odd, extremely full, the material had the look of corduroy but was black velvet. His trousers hugged his legs and his elegant feet were enclosed in a kind of boot. He moved his hand from his forehead through his tousled hair.

"I realize that no one here will admit to a belief in astrology, but I warned Sylvia not to come to Chicago. For a Libra at this time—well, you see what has happened."

"Nonsense," Emtee Dempsey said. "She was not strangled by a star."

Raoul smiled sweetly at her, as if approving such loyalty to her benighted beliefs.

Katherine said, "I had the impression she was fleeing trouble on the coast."

They had all learned a lot about Sylvia in the past twenty-four hours, and the colorful life she led was something of a surprise. They had known, of course, that she never married, but Kim was startled to learn that the actress had never been without a lover. Half a dozen shared the spotlight her death had created. Two of them were dead, one in a plane crash, another from an overdose of drugs. Of the four remaining, three gave unctuous accounts to the press of what a splendid person Sylvia had been. References to what it was like to live with her, while indiscreet, seemed meant in praise.

"Nick Faustino must be eating his heart out," Raoul said, leaning toward Katherine and putting a hand on her arm. Perhaps it was the tenor of the conversation, but Katherine, in her seventies, reacted as if the publicist, not yet forty, were making an indecent approach. He patted her arm and withdrew his hand. "I warned him not to bring that suit."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That suit" had been another indication that Sylvia's life did not incorporate the ideal that had been put before her at the M&M's college. Faustino had brought a palimony suit against her, seeking a settlement for the nearly two years they had lived together.

"It may have stretched over two years," Raoul said, in a Pickwickian defense of Sylvia's honor, "but it was just a weekend now and then. I don't think he ever moved in."

Such allegations against an honored alumna were bad; also bad was Faustino's inclusion of Jimmy Horan in his suit, as the one who had alienated Sylvia's affections. Joyce had been able to provide them with a circumstanced portrait of Horan.

Jimmy Horan was the son of a member of the Irish mafia in Hollywood and had been brought up to consider Cagney and Tracy and O'Brien as uncles. His father, too, had been married to but one woman with whom he had had five children. Any general statement about the laxness of morals among film actors was sure to be met with the counterexample of Jimmy Horan, Sr. For nearly twenty years, at Easter, he and his family had appeared in a television special, a show that Emtee Dempsey had called, the one time she watched it, "the apotheosis of wholesomeness." For Faustino to suggest that Jimmy Horan was involved in some illicit way with Sylvia Corrigan was a little like maligning the family and spitting on the flag.

"Of course it backfired on Faustino," Raoul St.-Loup said. "I knew it would hurt him. That's why I didn't warn him."

"Is Faustino a client of yours?" Emtee Dempsey asked.

"Not anymore."

Despite these preliminaries, the evening with Raoul St.-Loup proved more than informative. Joyce's roast beef with artichoke and the Italian wine, a Barolla, the gift of their lawyer, Mr. Rush, had much to do with this.

Early the next morning Katherine sent the summary she had made of the conversation to Walton Street by special messenger. Emtee Dempsey read it aloud.

> 1. Faustino was wrong to accuse Jimmy Horan of alienating Sylvia's affections, but there was another man in the picture, one whose identity was unknown even to Raoul St.-Loup himself. ("Think of me as a confessor," he quoted himself as saying to his clients. "Tell me all your sins. It doesn't matter, with me you can do no wrong. But I must know everything so that nothing can hurt you." A dubious theology, whatever could be said of it as public

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

relations.) Sylvia had broken this commandment—as well as ignoring the danger to a Libra in Chicago in this precise October—and look what had happened. In short, there was a new man in Sylvia's life.

2. The company with which Sylvia had played Antigone was still in town. Her agreement had been to star on two occasions, at the Blackstone, after which she would be replaced by another actress and the play would go on, doubtless to considerably diminished audiences. In the event, Sylvia had given but one performance and the replacement actress had gone on when Sylvia failed to appear at the theater. Faustino failed to appear at the theater. Faustino was also a member of the company, playing Creon.

3. Yet another of her one-time lovers was currently in Chicago. Brian Casey, the singer, was fulfilling a week's engagement in a Loop bistro.

4. Raoul St.-Loup had also been in Chicago at the time, here to see Sylvia's second and last performance as Antigone, but also out of concern for her because of her astrological sign.

Added to this information, which Richard either already knew or would know, was the fact that Sylvia had rented a suite at the Elysian Hotel for a month, and had instructed Maud Howe, her secretary, maid, confidante, and girl Friday, to pack her things and return to the Coast. Nonetheless, although Sylvia hoped to live on Walton Street, she would continue to retain her suite at the Elysian. There seemed little doubt that the strangling had taken place in her hotel suite.

"Was there a struggle?"

Richard shook his head. "The room wasn't torn up. But she did not die easily, by the look of the bed."

Emtee Dempsey had an appetite for details on such matters that Kim did not share, so she adjourned to the kitchen to be with Joyce. Fat chance.

"Bring Richard a beer," Emtee Dempsey said as Kim was leaving the room.

"He's already had a beer," Kim said, but she was looking at her brother. Richard knew that it was unwise for Moriaritys to drink. He should also know that the old nun was plying him with Heinekens in order to get more information out of him.

When Kim returned, Emtee Dempsey was summing up.

"Her publicist was here in Chicago, her secretary was here, others who knew her were here. Yet no one reported her missing? No one was surprised that she did not return?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No one reported her missing," Richard said. "It wasn't that long a time."

"All night?" But the old nun dropped her eyes. "Perhaps in her circle that would not have been considered long."

When Richard left, she looked at Kim. "You know what you must do now."

Kim looked at Emtee Dempsey, who was already preparing to begin her day's stint on her medieval history, a fresh sheet of paper before her, a giant fountain pen in her chubby hand.

"What do I know I must do?"

Blue eyes appeared over the gold-rimmed spectacles. "Go have a talk with Maud Howe, of course."

3.

Maud Howe was in her mid-twenties, a strawberry blonde with a face that seemed freshly scrubbed, pale blue eyes that looked right at Kim, and cheeks that dimpled when she smiled. Which she did when Kim told Maud that she was a nun.

"Funny."

"I'm quite serious. Sylvia Corrigan attended our college. She visited us the day this terrible thing happened. She asked if she could stay. . . ."

Maud held up her hand. "I know all that. You're really a nun?" She shook her head. "So why did Sylvia have to buy that elaborate get-up? You dress like anyone else."

Meaning Maud wasn't much of a dresser herself. She was wearing light-blue corduroy slacks, loafers, a heavy knit blouse. How an outdoor girl like her had ended up with the job she had was not obvious.

"Sylvia played a tennis pro in *Love Match* and I coached her. She kept me on. It has been a very lively few years."

"How many?"

"Four."

"I'm supposed to ask you why you didn't report Sylvia missing."

"Supposed to ask?"

Kim explained about Emtee Dempsey. Maud nodded. "Oh sure, she's the one Sylvia told me about. I assumed there was a house full of you dressed like her."

"The story in which Sylvia was supposed to play a nun is set at the time of the French Revolution. She would have had to wear a traditional habit."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, she got it."

"Where?"

"Hanson's. They specialize in supplying wardrobes for theatrical productions. Sylvia figured they'd have religious habits, and she was right."

"Tell me about it."

"You mean, the time, all that? You too?"

Maud sighed and then gave Kim what by now was a practiced account of events.

"I was scheduled to fly back to the Coast today. If Sylvia hadn't been discovered, I'd be gone. I suppose they would have insisted I return."

"They?"

"The police." She made a face.

"I suppose you've had to tell them this again and again."

"And everybody else."

"Like who?"

"All her friends who are in Chicago wanted to know." And she ticked off names they had already heard from Raoul St.-Loup. Of course Maud's list included St.-Loup as well. "To answer your first question, the reason I didn't report her missing was because I knew she meant to spend the night with you on Walton Street after her performance as Antigone. That's why she was sending me back to California. 'Nuns don't have secretaries.' " Maud gave a passable imitation of Sylvia.

"So what did you do?"

"You'd think I'd take a bath and go to bed with a good book, wouldn't you? I don't have that many chances just to relax. First I packed most of my things. Then I went down to hear Brian sing."

"Was Sylvia in her suite then?"

"Yes. I offered to accompany her to Walton Street, but she was determined to be on her own. I left first."

"Maud, who do you think did it?"

"I *know* who did it!"

"You do!"

"Nick Faustino." She gulped for air. "Don't ask me how he got in here. I can't imagine that Sylvia would let him in, but he has the guts of a burglar anyway. He hung around her until she finally got rid of him, almost physically, and then he brought that absurd lawsuit."

"It isn't true?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That they were lovers? I won't deny that. But he claims he lived with her. That he devoted himself to her career at the expense of his own. His career! And then that stupid story about Jimmy Horan. It's almost as if he doesn't want to be believed."

"If he hoped to get money from her, why would he kill her?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Why do people write on phone-booth walls and do other dumb things? Perhaps he just convinced himself he had lived with Sylvia and someone replaced him."

"Isn't that true?"

For the first time her eyes slid away. "You can't replace someone who never held a place."

"Did you tell the police about Faustino?"

"Did I ever."

"Is there any evidence at all that he did it?"

"Well, they certainly looked the place over."

"Maud, she wasn't wearing the habit when she was killed."

Maud studied Kim for half a minute. "They know that?"

Kim nodded. "Who is the new man?"

The eyes began to slide again, but she stopped them. "I don't know. I really don't. It's the first big secret she kept from me since I started working for her."

"But you have a guess?"

She laughed. "Several."

"Then why aren't there several possibilities of people who might have killed her?"

"I guess there are. *I* could have done it."

"What motive?"

"Tons of reasons. She was a bitch in many ways. Working for her had its moments but by and large, well, why did I stay on? I don't know. I felt like killing her at least once a day." Her grin was contagious.

"You have to come visit us on Walton Street."

"Would I have to wear a habit?"

"I don't recommend it."

But thoughts of Sylvia drove away the smiles. On the way back to Walton Street, Kim wondered if Maud Howe was really sad that her employer was dead. So far there seemed no genuine mourners for Sylvia Corrigan. People said things, things that sounded half rehearsed. But no one acted as if the death of Sylvia was cause for weeping.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The face of the man sitting in the chair opposite Sister Mary Teresa's desk was both familiar and legendary, the face of someone Kim felt she had long known. It was Brian Casey, the singer, one of the men in Sylvia Corrigan's life. He rose when Emtee Dempsey told him who Kim was, but his face was a tragic mask, mouth downturned, eyes sad.

"Mr. Casey informs me that the mystery is solved, Sister Kimberly."

"Maud Howe thinks Nick Faustino did it."

Casey plunged his face into his hands. "Oh, if only he had."

"Mr. Casey has just confessed to me that he murdered Sylvia Corrigan."

The famous face lifted from his hands and he looked woefully at Kim. Emtee Dempsey continued, "The question is, Sister, should he confess to the police?"

"But you were singing that night. Maud Howe went to see you."

"Yes, I know. And she did. But I slipped away between sets. The club is only a block from the Elysian."

"He walked," Emtee Dempsey said, and it was clear to Kim that she did not believe the singer's story.

"I came to Sister Mary Teresa because Sylvia and I were speaking of her just before the argument broke out. I had to tell someone."

"Were you surprised to find Sylvia in a religious habit?" Kim asked.

"Part of the sordidness of this is that I found her more attractive as a nun. I don't mean to shock you. And then we argued, I became furious, and . . . " He stopped for air. "It makes it so much worse, killing someone I love, killing someone in a religious habit."

"Strangling her?"

He nodded, then again covered his face with his hands. Emtee Dempsey and Kim exchanged a look. "I think you should wait before going to the police," the old nun said.

"What's the difference, sooner or later?"

"Have you ever been in jail?"

He looked up. "No."

"Later is better. Anyone will tell you that."

Kim assumed the old nun was trying to come up with a way of finding out why Brian Casey was telling this so easily disprovable story. It was clear that he knew only what had appeared in the newspapers. As the time for his evening performance neared, he grew more willing to postpone calling the police. Emtee Dempsey

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

assured him he should go to the club and entertain, but the way she said it made it clear she could not fathom why adults would sit around in an ill-lit smoke-filled room listening to even so good a singer as Brian Casey croon outdated songs. Kim went with him to the door. On the porch he turned his sad face to her once more. "I feel like Pagliacci," he said.

" 'Laughing on the outside'? "

" 'Crying on the inside'! I sing that." And he went off into the night, crooning the golden oldie.

The next morning, on the way back from Mass, Emtee Dempsey told Kim to stop for a newspaper. Once more in the car, she was reluctant to give it to the old nun until she herself had read the story. Emtee Dempsey said, "If you read it aloud, we could all know what has happened."

From the backseat, Joyce said, "You can't stand people who read the newspaper at you."

"I can when they won't give it to me."

Kim gave the paper over. Let Emtee Dempsey read aloud of the death of Brian Casey. Numbed, she started the car and continued to the house.

4.

The death of Brian Casey after he had visited her about Sylvia Corrigan's murder, which had also occurred after a visit to Walton Street, lit a fire in Emtee Dempsey. This had become doubly a personal matter now and she was over whatever inaction the news of Sylvia's private life had induced. No matter how the actress had lived, she had been ignobly murdered. And now Brian Casey, a perfectly harmless man, was also dead.

"But why did he come here saying he had killed her?" Kim asked.

"Why does anyone falsely confess to a murder?"

"Is there only one reason?"

"It is overwhelmingly likely to be because the one confessing is shielding another he thinks guilty. It may very well be that the element of truth in the man's story is that he did go to the Elysian Hotel between his entertainment sessions and that while there he saw the murderer or saw something which made him conclude who the murderer is. In either case, it was someone he wished to shield from harm."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kim tried unsuccessfully to stop the image of Maud Howe's face from forming in her mind. But if Maud came easily to mind as someone Brian might wish to protect, it was impossible to believe she needed it. And, on the hypothesis Emtee Dempsey was exploring, Maud would have to be the murderer not only of one person but of two. Whoever Brian Casey had been trying to protect had in the end killed him because his knowledge posed a threat.

"He confessed because he thought the other person would easily be suspected?"

"But he didn't quite confess, did he? He told me things and he repeated them to you. But the only risk he really ran was that you or I would feel compelled to tell the police what he had said. And what would he have done then?"

"Do you think he was that devious?"

The old nun smiled. "Sister Kimberly, we are all born devious. Our task is to overcome it by acquiring honesty and other virtues. I myself might be tempted to deviousness in certain circumstances, and who is to say I should not fall?"

"His telling us was insurance?"

"Don't dismiss the possibility. We'll never get to the bottom of this if you pretend to be surprised at the human capacity for iniquity." Emtee Dempsey might have been chiding herself for her reaction to the revelations of Sylvia's irregular life.

The life Sylvia had led raised questions about her funeral, but in the end it was decided to err on the side of mercy and Sylvia was buried from the cathedral. An auxiliary bishop of Chicago was in the sanctuary, but the Mass was said by a Los Angeles priest with golden hair, a tanned complexion, and a dental-ad smile who flew in from the Coast for the occasion. Father Estrella, identified in the papers as Sylvia's pastor.

"Spiritual director would be more accurate," Father Estrella told Kim when she engaged him in conversation. Emtee Dempsey had sent her to arrange a meeting; she wanted to speak to the "media priest."

"A friend of Sylvia's? Of course. Let's see." And out came an appointment book he opened and frowned over. "My being in Chicago is not much of a secret," he said in explanation.

"Sylvia had intended to stay with us as she readied herself for the Bernanos role."

His mouth opened and he pointed a finger at her. "Why didn't you say so? I want to meet Sister Mary Teresa."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She drove him there in the VW. At first he thought it was a joke, but he got in. The motor took awhile to start and he suggested a cab, but then it caught and she wheeled away from the curb and they were on their way.

"I didn't think any of these were still around."

"This one belonged to Hermann Goering, according to Joyce."

"Joyce is one of the sisters?"

"That's right."

"Hermann couldn't have gotten half a ham into this seat, I guarantee you. Tell me a bit about the old nun."

"What have you heard?"

"She was one of Sylvia's favorite people, that's for sure. Her conscience. Whenever she thought of taking her religion seriously again. She was practicing again of late, thank God."

"Did you hear how she died?"

"The strangling?"

"She wasn't dressed in the habit when she was killed."

"I see. Well, well. You're suggesting that the killer, having strangled her, dressed her up in a religious habit?"

"And put her in a chair at the end of the hotel corridor."

"Why on earth would he do that?"

"That is one of the questions Emtee Dempsey wants to put to you."

"The only bell that rings is that Sylvia's first appearance on film was a bit part in *Hotel.*"

Emtee Dempsey found that uninteresting. Kim was a little annoyed that the old nun seemed more interested in quizzing Estrella about his ministry in California than about Sylvia Corrigan.

If the priest hadn't brought up the murder, she wondered if Emtee Dempsey would have. But once Sylvia was mentioned, the questions began.

"Father, who killed her?"

He smiled, creating deep dimples in his tanned cheeks. "You want me to make a guess?"

"Is it safe to rule out Jimmy Horan?"

"Good Lord, yes."

"And now Brian is gone. That leaves a narrowed field."

"You can eliminate Samuelson, Hoague, and Jensen too, Sister."

"The previous lovers? On what basis?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, it is not generally known, but Samuelson is a homosexual. Sylvia permitted the rumors of an affair to circulate in order to help him keep his secret. It's not entirely a secret anymore, of course."

"And Hoague?"

"How often do former lovers remain friends?"

"I have no idea."

He smiled. "I suppose not. I can tell you it is infrequent. But then both Sylvia and Larry Hoague are actors. He was one of the few people who encouraged her to do *Antigone* here, and I'm told her performance was a triumph."

As for Jensen, he was not in Chicago and could not have been the night of the strangling because he was taking religious instruction from Father Estrella.

"It was an effect of knowing Sylvia. Feelings of guilt would bring her religious faith to the surface and she and Jensen talked about it. He became interested. He came to me. It's the reason the affair ended. Sylvia thought that should earn her credit in the great box office in the sky."

"She may be right," Emtee Dempsey said thoughtfully. "Now that leaves Faustino and St.-Loup."

"Sylvia was St.-Loup's meal ticket. From the time he landed her a part in *Hotel* he concentrated on her as his main client. And he was right. If he represented no one else, he would be a rich man. Sylvia recognized his value to her and rewarded him. I think he was written in for ten percent, just like her agent. But then, increasingly, that is how he functioned for her."

"She had another agent?"

"Not anymore. Larry Hoague must have been happy to turn the task over to Raoul. Acting is a more fulfilling activity.

"Father, you were reluctant to make a guess as to who did it, but what you say suggests that Faustino killed Sylvia and Brian."

If the conclusion surprised him, he did not show it. Then he said softly, "If I were to guess, I would say Faustino."

5.

The police had come to the same conclusion. Faustino was arrested on the steps of the cathedral after attending the funeral and taken away despite his pleas that he be allowed to go to the cemetery.

"I wonder what evidence they have," Kim said when they were back at Walton Street.

Emtee Dempsey squeezed her eyes shut. "So do I."

"Should I call Richard?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Her eyes opened. "You are volunteering? I was trying to think of a way to persuade you to invite him here that would not give you an opportunity to repeat your usual objections."

"I want to know."

"Of course. 'All men by nature desire to know.' Aristotle. Call him."

"Aristotle?"

The old nun pushed the phone toward Kim, giving her a look. "Being with theatrical folk has a bad effect on you, Sister Kimberly."

Richard was not offended by her suggestion that he stop by Walton Street. He was clearly happy to have swiftly settled on a prime suspect in the double murder.

Once Richard agreed to come, Emtee Dempsey decided it would be nice to have Katherine Senski there as well. "Oh, and ask Maud Howe as well."

"Richard might not like that."

"Why not? A slightly larger audience for him when he relates his triumph."

Was she being sarcastic? Richard arrived and she congratulated him warmly, and when Katherine came, and later Maud, she presented Richard as if he were the quintessence of effective police investigation.

"We're all just dying to hear how you learned it was Faustino."

"No more dying, now. Not in my jurisdiction." He smiled at Maud. Maud, it was evident, was the one Richard most wished to impress. Shame on him. Kim would get in a mention of his wife and children if he kept it up.

"How did you know it was Faustino?" Maud could play the ingenue role pretty effectively.

"I'd like to tell you it took a lot of thinking, a lot of lab work, a lot of patient routine. I am a great champion of routine. Most police work is fairly humdrum stuff, no mystery at all, except in trying to figure out what the judge and jury might do."

Emtee Dempsey cleared her throat. She knew when a lecture threatened. Not that she was often on the listening end.

"The truth is, he couldn't have made it more obvious that he had done it."

"How so?" Maud asked.

"Three things. First, the director of the play he was in described him as in a strange frame of mind. He arrived at the theater late, delaying the raising of the curtain, and until he was on seemed in a trance. Second, his fingerprints were found in the suite."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Maud said, "He came by the day before it happened. They might have been made then."

Richard smiled, unperturbed. "That's why it is so convenient that the bell captain saw him leave the Elysian near or slightly after the time the coroner places the murder."

"Carrying a box?" Emtee Dempsey asked.

Richard had expected applause, not questions, but he managed a tight smile. "I wouldn't want you too easily convinced, Sister Mary Teresa. But when you add these things up, you've got a prima facie case. I think Faustino is ready to tell us all about it."

"Brian Casey was ready to do that."

"What do you mean?"

"He told me and Sister Kimberly most solemnly that he had killed Sylvia."

"Why would he say a thing like that?"

But it was Maud who answered. "The dope probably thought I killed Sylvia and wanted to make the ultimate sacrifice." Her voice broke. "And now he really has."

Emtee Dempsey was usually intolerant of tears, but on this occasion she got up and went to Maud and put her arm around her shoulder.

"So it was you he was protecting?"

She bobbed her head and got herself under control. "I haven't told you everything," she said to Richard, and glanced at Kim as well. "I found Sylvia that night. I came in and called for her and she didn't answer and then when I went into the room . . ." She broke down again.

"There, there. Just take your time and tell us," the old nun said soothingly.

"Faustino was in bed with her. Nick Faustino!" Maud looked around. "Sylvia was furious to be discovered with him. Nick sprang from the bed and a minute later was out of the apartment, but Sylvia and I had a real showdown. It ended in a pillow fight! God knows what weapons we would have used if she hadn't grabbed a pillow and begun hitting me with it. I took another pillow. It was like summer camp. Only we were deadly serious. At some point, she fled to the bathroom and locked herself in and I got out of there."

"To see Brian Casey?"

"Yes."

"What time was this?" Richard asked.

"I got to the club for Brian's first show."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

That began at eight, so Richard calculated that Maud had left the hotel five or ten minutes before the hour.

"Giving Faustino his chance," Richard said.

"Let the child continue, Richard," Emtee Dempsey said.

"Brian went to the hotel after his first show. To get my things. I couldn't face Sylvia again."

When he got to the Elysian, Brian let himself into the suite with the key Maud had given him. The door of Sylvia's bedroom was open and he looked in, to tell her why he had come.

"The bed was all torn apart and she was sprawled across it. Dead. Brian tried her pulse and there was no point in calling an ambulance. He got her down the hall to the elevator. He descended to the mezzanine, took the body off, and propped it in a chair."

"Why in the world did he do that?"

"To protect me. I realized he didn't believe Sylvia was still alive when I left the hotel."

"Did he dress the body?"

Maud looked up at Richard. "That was the strange part. He said he found her lying on the bed dressed in a nun's habit."

Sister Mary Teresa said to Richard, "Well, you have a thing or two to ask Mr. Faustino, don't you?"

Richard made a thin line with his lips. Being instructed by Emtee Dempsey on how to do his job was almost more than he could bear. "I want you to come along with me, Miss Howe. Let's get all this down for the record."

"She should have a lawyer," Katherine said and met Richard's glare defiantly. "I am not suggesting that you regularly use torture, Lieutenant Moriarity. It is simply better all around that she have counsel before making statements."

"I will call Mr. Rush," Emtee Dempsey said.

She did, and their lawyer arranged to meet Richard and Maud downtown.

"I'll come along," Kim said. Maud still looked shaken.

"That isn't necessary," the young woman said.

"Nonsense," Emtee Dempsey said, always willing to volunteer Kim's services. "Of course Sister will accompany you."

6.

Katherine was still at the house when Kim returned, talking with Emtee Dempsey. Joyce had retired. The reporter looked a little under the influence of the sherry she had been drinking.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh good, Kim, you're back. I've been refusing to leave until I have a witness to what this impossible old woman has told me."

"Katherine," said Emtee Dempsey, sipping her tea, "I have no idea why you make such a fuss about it."

"Oh, don't you? Kim, Sister Mary Teresa has told me that she knows who killed Sylvia Corrigan and Brian Casey."

"You heard Richard, Katherine. They've arrested Nick Faustino." How much sherry had Katherine had?

"But she says it isn't Faustino!"

Emtee Dempsey smiled sweetly toward where the horizon would be if the wall hadn't been in the way. "Of course it isn't."

"Then who is it?" Kim asked.

The old nun took her watch from the pocket concealed by her wimple and pressed its stem to open it. "It is nearly eleven o'clock. Much too late for revelations. Tomorrow will be soon enough."

"Oh, posh," Katherine said. "You're showboating."

"I wonder what the origin of that expression is?" Emtee Dempsey said, apparently genuinely curious.

"You're changing the subject."

"I will do what I said I would do before noon tomorrow. Would you like to join us for night prayers, Katherine?"

"No," the reporter said, rising and then steadying herself. "This old sinner is going home to bed."

"Sister Kimberly will get you a cab."

It was difficult in chapel, during compline, to fight distraction. Emtee Dempsey recited the psalms with obvious relish. She loved reciting the office. Did she really know who had killed those two people? How could she? Kim knew as much as, maybe more than, the old nun did. And, like Maud Howe, who certainly knew more than both of them, Kim was satisfied that the police had the killer in custody. If not Faustino, who?

She shook her head, trying not to feel annoyance at Emtee Dempsey. The old nun was showboating, as Katherine had said.

But later, in bed, staring wide awake at the ceiling, Kim went over everything she knew about the two murders.

Sylvia Corrigan had left the house on Walton Street, gone to Hanson's and purchased two religious habits, gone to the hotel, presumably to prepare for her evening performance as Antigone, and been surprised in bed with Nick Faustino by Maud. Faustino fled, the two women had a fight, and Maud had gone to the club where Brian Casey was performing. The singer had gone to the Elysian Hotel between shows to pick up Maud's things, found Sylvia

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dead in a Carmelite habit. Obviously not believing Maud's story, he had removed the body from the room and placed it where attention would turn on Nick Faustino. In the event, the body had been discovered by hotel personnel and removed to the morgue where Sister Mary Teresa had identified the body as that of her former student.

"Why was the body sent to the morgue? Why did you have to identify it? The hotel must have known whose body it was." It was the following morning, and Kim had managed to hold back such questions until they had returned from Mass and were having breakfast.

"Indeed they did."

"You sound very sure."

"Tell her, Sister Joyce."

"When you went downtown with Maud, Sister sent me on an errand."

"Two errands," the old nun corrected.

But the one had depended on the other. Joyce had talked with Mouhman Charles, the bell captain who had noticed the exit of Nick Faustino at a quarter after eight. The old nun had been certain that such an observant man would have more to tell.

"He remembered Maud leaving before eight, he recognized Brian Casey when he showed up about nine. And he said he told the manager the dead woman was Sylvia Corrigan. He was ignored."

Emtee Dempsey smiled. Her smile dimmed when Kim congratulated her on corroborating Richard's theory. "Ah. You remember what I told Katherine?"

"Even worse, Katherine will remember."

"Mr. Charles answered what for me was the great unasked question."

"And what is that?"

"What happened to the second habit?"

Kim made a face. The second habit? But of course, they had been told that Sylvia bought two at Hanson's. She had been wearing one when she was found dead on the mezzanine of the Elysian Hotel. "It is probably in Sylvia's room at the hotel."

The old nun shook her head. "No. Sister Joyce and Mr. Charles ascertained that it wasn't."

"You'd better ask Richard. They probably took it away."

Emtee Dempsey ignored this. "It explained the most curious observation Mouhman Charles made that evening. A nun in full habit left the hotel after Maud and later Faustino left but before Brian was seen leaving."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"After Maud?"

The old nun smiled. "Of course one would think that. Maud's quarrel with Sylvia might have ended in violence and she left the hotel disguised as a Carmelite. One might then expect to find the unaccounted-for second habit in Brian Casey's dressing room."

Kim looked at Joyce. "You checked?"

"No. When I phoned and told Sister what I had learned at the hotel, she sent me on the second errand."

"Where."

"To the Blackstone Theater."

"Why?"

"I found a Carmelite habit stuffed in a bag in the bottom drawer of Larry Hoague's dressing table."

"Larry Hoague!"

Joyce said, "Mouhman recognized him when he came to the hotel that night, but he never saw him leave."

Kim remembered Father Estrella's mention of Hoague, the former lover and former actor too, who had at one time served as Sylvia's agent, the one who had urged Sylvia to give several performances in the production of *Antigone* he was directing. The doorbell rang and Kim's head was spinning with these new revelations when she went to answer it. She did not recognize the man to whom she opened the door. No taller than herself, fine-boned, diminutive, dramatic, his look of anticipation faded as he looked at Kim.

"I'm dreadfully sorry. I thought this was a . . . " He stopped. "I am looking for Mary Teresa Dempsey."

"Come in."

"Then I have come to the right place? I was sure I had."

"Whom should I say is calling?"

"Hoague. Lawrence Hoague."

7.

"Ah, Mr. Hoague, I'm so delighted to see you," Emtee Dempsey said, thumping into the hall. She shook the actor's hand and led him into the living room.

"Sylvia spoke of you often, of course," Hoague said, as he settled into a chair. But he shook away the memory. "I acted immediately on your suggestion, Sister, and would have phoned you last night if it hadn't gotten to be such an ungodly hour. As I said then, I share your fears for Maud. I looked everywhere for her, discreetly, of course. She did not return to the hotel. If she checked in elsewhere I was unable to discover it. Of course I asked first where Brian Casey had been staying."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Without luck?"

"None! My only comfort is that, if something dreadful had happened, we would have heard."

"These have been confusing days for us," Emtee Dempsey said, with uncharacteristic puzzlement.

"Not only for you. Do not think that we in the world are inured to such events as these. I still can't believe it. Sylvia." Her name was musical on his lips. His eyes closed. His eyes opened. "We must inform the police that Maud is missing."

"Mr. Hoague, they have already made an arrest."

"Faustino!"

"Even if he had learned that Maud knew far more than she told the police, he could do nothing about it while in custody. Faustino played Creon in your production of *Antigone,* did he not?"

"Yes."

"Do you play a role?"

"Teresias."

"The blind prophet."

Hoague seemed to become a shriveled old man. " 'For the blind man goes where his leader tells him to.' "

"Teresias, as I remember, does not appear until very late in the play."

He nodded in admiration. "That is correct."

"The actor playing that part could be elsewhere for most of the performance, I suppose."

"Not when that actor is also the director."

"Then you were at the Blackstone throughout the performance?"

"What an odd question."

"Of course you needn't answer it."

"My dear Sister, I was at the Blackstone before, during, and after the performance that night."

"But you were seen at the Elysian Hotel, Mr. Hoague."

"That's impossible."

"The man who saw you is the same man who saw Nick Faustino there that night. The police found him reliable. He saw you arrive but he did not see you leave."

"Since I was not there, he could not have seen me leave."

"You mean he would not have recognized you as a nun?"

In the silence that followed, the door from the kitchen opened and Joyce entered, followed by Maud Howe.

"Richard is on his way, Sister. They found the habit where I told them they would."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lawrence Hoague was on his feet and on his way out of the room in a single movement, but Maud barred his way.

"You wouldn't kill another woman, would you, Larry?"

He lunged at her, trying for her throat, but Maud brought her arms up, turned her body, and caught her assailant in the chest with her pivoting elbow, upsetting his balance. In a moment, he was on the floor, face down, his arm behind his back, upward pressure on it being exerted by the straddling Maud. This was the condition of Larry Hoague a minute later when Richard arrived and took him into custody.

8.

The following night Katherine, Maud Howe, and Father Estrella came to the house on Walton Street for dinner. The priest had been providing spiritual comfort to Larry Hoague, who had been arrested and charged with the murders of Sylvia Corrigan and Brian Casey. Nick Faustino had been released and left town calling down curses on all the friends who had abandoned him in his troubles. Raoul St.-Loup had told Maud that he intended to make her into a star of the first magnitude.

"In what?" the media priest asked.

"A musical version of *Tom Sawyer.*"

" nother?"

"There goes my career," Maud said.

"I would feel more sympathy if you had been candid with me, young lady," Sister Mary Teresa said.

"Will you play Becky Thatcher?" Father Estrella asked.

"Can Larry Hoague direct me from prison?"

"There are those who would call prison the natural home of directors." The priest's brows rose as he spoke.

"There was a falling out between Sylvia and Hoague wasn't there?" Emtee Dempsey said.

Father Estrella was delighted to fill them in, clearly relishing his role as the purveyor of inside show-biz gossip to these innocent ears. Some of what he knew he had learned as Sylvia's spiritual advisor.

"I no longer feel bound to secrecy," he said. "Not in these circumstances. She phoned me on the coast just hours before the dreadful event."

Few, he intoned, would have suspected Larry's professional dependence on his former lover and protegee. The world had considered their talents equal, but Larry knew better. Sylvia's agreement to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

act in Hoague's production of *Antigone* had been wrung reluctantly from her. Hoague was convinced that with Sylvia his production would be a success. But after one performance, the actress had told Father Estrella, Sylvia called Larry and told him she would not be at the theater for the second. Her excuse was the mental preparation necessary to play a Carmelite nun.

"I can imagine the rest," the priest murmured.

Hoague arrived at the Elysian Hotel to learn that Faustino had preceded him to the actress's suite.

"He took their assignation to be the reason for Sylvia's canceling her second performance. He sat in the lobby watching Maud leave and then Faustino, in a hurry to get to the Blackstone. The play could start without Hoague. He had decided to settle old scores with Sylvia." The priest moved the spread fingers of his right hand through the blond thicket of his hair. "The poor man was riddled with resentment, years of reversal, near-misses, failures swam before his mind. He saw Sylvia as the great betrayer."

She left him for other men, she had replaced him as her agent, she had permitted him to count on her performances as warrant for staging a production of *Antigone.*

"Had you any idea of how he felt toward Sylvia?" Father Estrella asked Maud.

"No, but I understand it. He had helped make her a star, getting her her first roles, but he was part of the past. She had not wanted to play *Antigone,* to do it once was an enormous favor. But it was a favor to Nick Faustino, not to Larry Hoague. In her own mind, she had already become a nun."

There was a moment of silence when they all seemed to be thinking of that oddly costumed corpse sitting in a chair on the mezzanine of the Elysian Hotel.

"May she rest in peace," Emtee Dempsey said with emotion. "I for one shall always remember her as a college student doing *The Lady's Not For Burning.*"

"Suggest to Raoul that he get that as a vehicle for you," Father Estrella suggested to Maud.

"Uh uh. I don't like the precedent."

"I'm ready when you are," Joyce announced and they all went into the dining room to eat. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM G. TAPPLY

William Tapply is a regular contributor to a number of sporting and gardening magazines, including Outdoor Life *and* Sports Illustrated. *In 1984 his first crime novel appeared, featuring lawyer sleuth Brady Coyne, the protagonist of eleven subsequent books. The legal profession plays a key role not only in Mr. Tapply's novels but in this new short story for* EQMM . . .

BREAKING AND EXITING

by WILLIAM G. TAPPLY

I was sitting on my usual bench on the Boston Common, the one that faced up the hill to the golden dome of the State House, thumbing through the paper and tossing popcorn at the pigeons and enjoying the warmth of the April afternoon, when a guy in a three-piece suit sat down beside me. "Filthy creatures," he said, kicking a pigeon away from his leg.

"I like 'em," I said. I threw a handful of popcorn near the guy's feet. "Better than people. Pigeons're honest, at least. You always know where you stand with a pigeon."

"They just want something for nothing."

"Who doesn't?" I said.

"Not me," he said. "I pay."

"Who're you?"

He turned and held out his hand. "Call me John. And you're Manny, right?"

I ignored his hand and touched the lapel of his suit jacket. "Nice," I said. "You a lawyer?"

"Actually, I am. Why? Does it matter?"

I shrugged. "A man can always use a good lawyer. Are you good?"

© 1995 by William G. Tapply.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I'm very good." He smiled. "And I heard you were too."

"You heard right. I'm pretty good."

"Two hundred up front, the rest on delivery, I understand."

"Two hundred now," I said. "Nonrefundable. Then we can talk."

He smiled and reached into his jacket pocket. He was fiftyish, with iron-gray hair worn longish on the sides and thinning on top. A good-looking, trim guy. The suit was expensive and the shoes were shiny. He fished four fifties out of his thin wallet, folded them together, and pressed them into my hand.

I jammed them into my pants pocket. "Okay," I said. "We can talk."

"It's a house in Harlow—"

"Suburbs cost more," I said.

He waved his hand. "Sure. Anyhow, you'll find three leather-bound albums in an upstairs bedroom."

"Stamps?"

He shook his head. "Baseball cards, actually. The place will be empty between seven and eleven in the evening. There's a back-door key behind the shutter to the left of the kitchen window."

"You're sure of all this?"

He smiled and nodded.

"Between seven and eleven every evening?"

"For the foreseeable future, anyway."

"What about an alarm?"

"No. It's just a development house. Nothing fancy."

"Dogs?"

He shook his head.

"What about delivery?"

"How about here, same time tomorrow?"

"No," I said. "I don't make deliveries in my own office."

"Not a problem," he said. "There's a coffee shop on Charles Street. Vincent's."

"I'll find it," I said. "Bring twenty fifties. Or fifty twenties. Or some combination thereof."

He pressed a piece of paper into my hand. "We got a deal?" he said.

I glanced at the paper. "James Bascomb, 29 Harrington St., Harlow," was scrawled on it. I stuck it into the pocket with the fifties. "Okay," I said. "A deal. I'll see you tomorrow at Vincent's."

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I retrieved my blue '87 Escort from the lot by the Greyhound station around six that evening. I figured it would take about an hour to drive out the Mass Pike to Harlow, which lies just west of Route 495. Harlow is one of those Massachusetts villages that started as farmland a hundred years ago, became a bustling bedroom community for all the high-tech firms that sprang up around Boston in the seventies, then began to deteriorate in the late eighties.

I stopped at a gas station, got directions to Harrington Street, and found it a little before seven, approaching twilight. Kids were riding bicycles on the sidewalks and dribbling basketballs in the driveways. It was a typical middle-class suburban development. Number twenty-nine was a small colonial on a street lined with other small colonials on half-acre lots. A Toyota sedan—three or four years old, I guessed—sat in the driveway. A hoop was mounted on the garage, but no kids played in the Bascombs' yard.

I continued past without slowing down and drove back to the center of town. I parked at a McDonald's—.5 miles from the Bascomb house by the Escort's odometer. I went in, had a fish sandwich, large fries, and a small black coffee, and read the paper while the sun went down.

A little after eight, I headed back to Harrington Street on foot. It took about ten minutes to walk there. The kids had all gone inside and station wagons sat in the driveways and orange lights glowed from the windows of the boxy little houses.

A light shone over the front porch of number twenty-nine, but the rest of the house was dark. I slipped into the backyard. No alarm, John had said. I took out my penlight and examined the door and window frames anyway. He was right.

The key hung on a nail behind the shutter, just as he'd said it would. I opened the back door and stepped inside. I entered a small pantry that led to an eat-in kitchen where a stack of dirty dishes filled the sink. He'd said the albums would be in an upstairs bedroom, but I looked around anyway. You never can tell when you'll find something good—a bonus for the enterprising burglar-for-hire.

Several framed photographs stood on top of a big console television in the living room: a wedding picture of a plain blond woman holding the arm of a pleasant-looking young man wearing steel-rimmed glasses; a toddler cradling a miniature football; the parents, a bit older than in their wedding picture, posing on either side of a boy who looked to be about six, each holding one of his hands, with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mountains in the background; the same boy, a few years older, posing in a Little League uniform.

They made an adorable yuppie family, with their mortgages and retirement plans and vacations and in-laws. The only thing missing was a cocker spaniel.

I love to burglarize yuppies.

I found nothing of interest in the living room. A small room beside the staircase looked more promising. One wall was lined with bookshelves, and on top of a big desk were the standard computer and telephone and fax machine. I went through the desk drawers and found nothing of value.

My penlight paused at a framed black-and-white photo on the wall over the desk. It showed two men shaking hands and smiling into the camera. One of them was the same guy I'd seen in the photos atop the television. The other was my employer, the lawyer who called himself John. The photo was inscribed: "For James Bascomb, our newest associate, With best wishes, John Troutman."

I had to smile. This John Troutman deserved credit.

There were three bedrooms upstairs. The smallest was decorated with posters of Dee Brown and Robert Parish and Michael Jordan. A couple of baseball bats and a hockey stick were propped up in the corner. The bed was made. No Coke cans or pizza boxes or dirty underwear littered the floor. Everything was clean and tidy. I wondered what kind of little nerd would keep his room so neat.

The three leather-bound albums were stacked on a little green desk in the corner. I opened the one on top and shone my penlight on it. Mounted under Plexiglas were cards picturing Joe DiMaggio, Ted Williams, Stan Musial, and Dizzy Dean. I flipped through the pages. I knew nothing about the value of baseball cards. But it was clear that these were old and in mint condition.

I figured John Troutman had himself a good deal.

I tucked the albums under my arm and let myself out the way I had come in. I locked the back door and hung the key on its nail behind the shutter, then strolled down Harrington Street to my car in the McDonald's lot. I put the albums in the trunk, got a black coffee to go, and drove home.

He was waiting at a rear table at Vincent's when I got there at two the following afternoon. I put the shopping bag that held the three albums on the table in front of him, then stood there looking down at him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Have a seat," said Troutman.

"Pay me."

He smiled and gestured to the seat across from him. "Come on. Relax. Try the coffee. Have a croissant."

"Just pay me, okay?"

He put the shopping bag on the floor, removed one of the albums, and opened it on his lap under the table. Then he looked up at me and smiled. "Good," he said. "Have any problems?"

I folded my arms and said nothing.

He shrugged, reached inside his jacket, and pulled out a small manila envelope. He put it on the table.

I picked up the envelope and shoved it inside my jacket. Then I turned to go.

"Wait a minute," said Troutman. "You got a problem?"

"No problem. I just don't like you. But don't take it personally. I don't like anyone."

He shrugged. "Hey," he said. "Business is business, huh? You're a crook. You ought to understand."

"Sure I understand," I said. Then I left.

I waited across the street, and ten minutes later Troutman came out of Vincent's. He was carrying the shopping bag. He looked up and down the street, then set off at a fast walk toward the Common. I fell in fifty feet behind him and followed him across town to a fancy office building on State Street. I gave him a few minutes, then went in. I found Troutman and Berman, Attorneys at Law, listed on the directory. Seventh floor. Information I might be able to use sometime.

Then I went home.

I was back on my bench the next afternoon, feeding the pigeons and skimming through the paper and wondering if any business would come my way when a small headline caught my eye. "Harlow Boy Still in Coma," it read.

The facts jumped at me: Billy Bascomb . . . eleven years old . . . freak skateboarding accident . . . Children's Hospital . . .

I stood up, dumped the bag of popcorn on the ground, and walked over to the lot by the Greyhound station. I took the manila envelope from the trunk of my Escort, then headed to State Street.

The reception area of Troutman and Berman featured Danish modern furniture and Chagall prints and ficus plants and a brunette with a short skirt and long fingernails. Her smile seemed genuine. "Help you, sir?" she said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Mr. Troutman, please."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No. But he'll see me."

She shrugged. "Who shall I tell him?"

"Tell him it's Manny."

"Manny . . . ?"

"Just Manny," I said.

She picked up the phone and spoke softly into it. When she hung up, she gave me another smile, this one a shade less genuine. "He'll see you now, sir. This way."

I followed her down a short corridor. She opened a door that was labeled John A. Troutman and held it for me.

I walked past her. Troutman was behind a desk the size of a banquet table. He was leaning back in his swivel chair with his hands laced behind his head, grinning at me. "Sit," he said.

I remained standing.

"Okay," he said, "don't sit." He glanced over my shoulder and said, "We're fine, honey. Shut the door."

He waited until the door latched, then leaned forward and stuck his chin at me. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I understand you have a collection of baseball cards for sale."

"I'll give you one minute to get out of here. Then I call security."

"No you won't. Because if you do that, then I talk."

He stared at me for a moment, then nodded and smiled. "Good point. So what do you want?"

"The albums." I put the manila envelope on his desk. "I keep the two hundred. It's nonrefundable."

"Why should I do this?"

"Because otherwise the police will receive an anonymous tip, and the Bascombs will verify that their boy's albums are missing, and the cops'll get a warrant, and even if you manage to hide the albums, you'll never be able to sell them, and your name will be pasted on the front page of the *Globe*. Good enough?"

He squinted at me, as if trying to figure out if I was serious. I guess he decided I was, because he said, "What's to stop me from making an anonymous phone call?"

"Go ahead," I said.

"Yeah, I get it," he said after a minute. "You heard about the kid, then, huh?"

"It was in the paper."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I was told you were a tough guy," he said. "I didn't figure you for a bleeding heart."

I shrugged. "I didn't figure you were that much of a bastard, either."

"Well, live and learn," he said. "It was a perfect setup, though, wasn't it?"

"Perfect," I said. "Those poor parents are so worried about their little boy in the hospital they wouldn't notice the missing albums until long after you sold the cards."

"So what's your problem?"

"I don't have a problem anymore," I said. "So did the Bascombs have the boss over to dinner? That how you knew about it?"

He nodded. "The kid took me to his room, showed me his basketball posters and his Roger Clemens autographed baseball. The albums came from some uncle who died. The kid had no conception of their value. He didn't even care about them."

"Yeah," I said. "It was a perfect setup. Let's have the albums."

He slid open a drawer in his desk and lifted out the three albums one at a time. He piled them in front of him. "It's an incredible collection," he said softly. "There's a Mickey Mantle in there that's worth—"

"Good," I said, picking them up. "I know just what to do with them."

As I turned to the door, he said, "Maybe we can do business again."

"You never can tell," I said.

I sipped coffee at McDonald's until a little after eight, then strolled down Harrington Street with the three albums under my arm. Orange lights glowed from the windows of the little colonials, but number twenty-nine was dark and there was no Toyota sedan in the driveway. I took the key from behind the shutter, unlocked the back door, and went in.

I headed directly upstairs and put the albums back where I found them on Billy Bascomb's little green desk. I suddenly felt very tired. I sat on Billy's bed and shone my penlight around his room. It was too neat for a room that a boy actually lived in. I figured Billy's mother had straightened up everything for the day he came home from the hospital.

I had the urge to leave Billy a note. "I hope you come back to this room," I wanted to say. "I hope you get to shoot hoops again. I hope

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

these baseball cards fund your college education. I hope you have a long and wonderful life."

But, of course, I left no note. I switched off my penlight and sat there in the dark for a while, part of me wishing I had a boy of my own, and part of me grateful that I didn't have to experience what Billy Bascomb's father was going through. Then I stood up, sighed, and went downstairs.

When I got to the pantry I turned off my penlight. I paused inside the door for a minute, the way I always do, then quietly pulled it open and stepped out onto the back porch.

And that's when the floodlight suddenly came on and the bullhorn voice said, "Hold it right there. Put your hands behind your head and come down the steps slowly."

I did as I was told. A pair of cops approached me with their revolvers drawn. One of them cuffed me. "So, Manny," he said. "How's it going?"

"Have we met?" I said.

"Your reputation precedes you, tough guy."

"So what's the squawk here?" I said. "Reverse larceny? Breaking and exiting?"

"A funny man," he said. "You got the right to remain silent—"

"Yeah, I know," I said. "I won't say anything until I call my lawyer."

"You better have a good one this time, pal."

"I do," I said. "The best. He's a partner with a big State Street firm."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a *NEW* Michael Vlado story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Edward D. Hoch takes Michael Vlado on a Spanish odyssey this time, where he finds intrigue in the pageantry of Holy Week. Spain is renowned for its festivals; not least of which (from the perspective of crime readers) is Semana Negra—Black Week—funded by the Spanish government and designed to celebrate crime fiction in all its forms . . .

THE BUTCHER OF SEVILLE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

In anyplace but Seville it would have been a bizarre sight. Dozens of red-robed figures, wearing conical gold hoods with eyeholes and carrying five-foot-tall candles like shepherds' staffs, moved slowly in a long single line toward the cathedral. It was Holy Week—*Semana Santa*—all over Spain and the Christian world, but only in Seville was the pageantry so elaborate. Wearing the colorful costumes of penitents, usually masked, members of fifty-two religious brotherhoods converged on the cathedral where the Spanish cardinal would conduct services. Each of the brotherhoods represented a local church, and each carried a richly bedecked statue marking the passion and death of Christ as they paraded to loud music more martial than sacred.

Now, as the gold-hooded procession came upon another group wearing rich purple hoods, they slowed to let the others past. Eyes went to the heavy golden figure of Christ being scourged, carried on the shoulders of a team of volunteers. "A burdensome task in this heat," one of the hooded penitents remarked to his companion. "Though well worth the effort." Enrique did not answer him, and Juan Diaz took the other's silence as an admonition at this holy

© *1995 by Edward D. Hoch.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

time. They continued on for another block, reaching the intersection where the procession made its final turn toward the gaping front doors of the cathedral. His companion whispered something that Juan Diaz didn't catch. "What? What did you say?" he asked.

As they passed through the cathedral doors Enrique pulled him aside, out of the line, as the others made their way down the center aisle to the assigned seating section. "This way, Juan Diaz!"

He followed Enrique into the shadows as the remaining penitents passed them by. "What is it? Why do you lead me here? My place is with the Lord."

"You will be with the Lord soon enough," the figure in red and gold said. "Soon enough." A hand came out from beneath the robe and then Juan Diaz saw the ugly steel bayonet.

"You are not Enrique! Who are you?"

He felt the blade break through his skin as he wrenched off the other's conical hood and looked upon the face of his murderer.

The May meeting that brought Michael Vlado to Seville seven weeks later was billed as the First Gypsy Congress of the European Union, an attempt to organize against the growing wave of violence aimed at Roms and all people viewed as foreign. Michael's little village in the Romanian foothills had remained relatively free of any organized violence, but as a Gypsy king he was all too aware of the killings and burnings nearby. He had come to Spain to do what he could.

It was a local Rom named Garib who told him of the killings. He was a tall, handsome man in his twenties with a bushy black moustache, and Michael had first noticed him during a question period when he raised his hand and asked, "Are you the Michael Vlado who solved the mystery near here four years ago involving the crypt of the Gypsy saint?"

Michael admitted he was, and a low murmur ran through the audience. Afterward Garib asked to speak with him in private. They went down to a large atrium in the building where the meeting was taking place. "We have nearly nine hundred thousand Gypsies in Spain," Garib told him. "Most work as itinerant peddlers or beggars, camping on the fringes of cities in rat-infested shantytowns."

"Is there no subsidized housing?"

"The *gadjo* is as poor as we are. They do not want Roms as neighbors. I am not concerned for myself. I have been luckier than most. In a few days I will be marrying a lovely Rom woman who has been

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

educated in England. I will be leaving Seville for a job in Madrid. But my brethren are trapped here."

"I wish there was something I could—"

"There is. An innocent man, a Rom, has been held in jail here for seven weeks, on charges that he killed three people. The police believe him to be the notorious Butcher of Seville."

The name, so typical of modern journalism, caught Michael's interest. "A so-called serial killer?"

"So they claim."

Michael glanced around, aware of a young woman passing close enough to overhear them. Garib seemed not to notice. "Tell me about the killings."

"The first was in late winter, an Englishwoman vacationing with her husband. Then an old Gypsy man was killed in his caravan. And during Holy Week one of the penitents in a procession was stabbed to death right in the back of the cathedral. All three of the killings were especially brutal, which earned him the name of Butcher. It was after the third killing that Nunzio was arrested and charged."

"There is evidence against him?"

"Not enough to convict anyone but a Gypsy. He'd argued with Juan Diaz, the man killed at the cathedral, and he knew the old Gypsy, Kalderash."

"And the English tourist?"

"He often took the children to the hotels to beg money from tourists. They think he might have met the woman there."

Michael Vlado sighed. "I am no detective, Garib. I am in Seville for the conference."

"Talk to him. It would boost his spirits if nothing else."

So Michael accompanied Garib the next morning to the city jail, a grim stone building within sight of the royal palace of Alcazar. Nunzio was a young man, no more than thirty. He toyed with a pack of cigarettes in the visitors' room, barely responding to the questions they addressed to him.

"I am innocent," he told Michael without passion.

"Then the true Butcher of Seville must be found before he kills more."

Garib snorted. "A wise killer would leave the city or at least cease the killings until Nunzio is convicted. Every day that passes without another killing strengthens the case against him."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Michael could see the logic of his reasoning but he also knew that serial killers rarely behaved logically. When the urge to kill was upon them they did not stop to consider the consequences. "Did you know the Englishwoman?"

"No."

"And the second victim?"

"I knew him as a fellow Rom. He was a sick old man. I saw him once or twice begging money near the hotels."

"But you'd argued with the third victim."

"In a tavern. It was nothing."

"They have no other evidence against you—no bloodstains or fingerprints, no eyewitnesses?"

"None."

"Then they shouldn't be holding you. I'll see if there's anything we can do."

As they left the jail, Garib asked, "Do you think you can get him released?"

"I don't know. He doesn't really have much to say in his own defense. Still, we have two hundred and fifty Gypsies in Seville for this conference. Our voices may mean something."

"I hope so," the handsome Rom said. "Next week I will be married. If Nunzio is free and you are still in Seville, I want you at my wedding."

By the time the four-day Gypsy Congress of the European Union came to an end, Nunzio Sorja was a free man. Michael and Garib, working together, had persuaded the Congress to issue a statement condemning the unjust imprisonment of Gypsies everywhere, and calling upon the Seville police to free Nunzio. It proved to be the right statement at the right time. "They didn't have the evidence," Garib concluded. "They must have been looking for an excuse to release him."

Michael himself escorted Nunzio to the closing session of the Congress after a detective captain named Lerida reluctantly released him. When he reached the speakers' platform, the somber young man said nothing but "Thank you!" This brought cheers as he immediately left the platform.

"We did a good thing," Michael Vlado told Garib. "I wonder why he isn't more pleased."

The tall Rom at his side said simply, "If he is not the Butcher of Seville, someone else is. The real killer has not struck in seven weeks. Now he may kill to implicate Nunzio."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Michael knew he was right. "I may stay here a few days extra."

"For what purpose?"

"The latest killing, during Holy Week—does anything about it strike you as odd?"

"That man Juan Diaz? He was killed in the back of the cathedral by one of the masked penitents. Another member of his religious brotherhood was assaulted earlier and his robe and hood were stolen."

"I must speak with that man. What is his name?"

"I'll find out," Garib promised.

The following day, when most of the Gypsy delegates were leaving for home, Michael took a taxi to a house in the north part of the city, on the Avenida de Eduardo Dato. It was a wide, busy street, the main route east to Granada. Michael had phoned first, and Enrique Montoto was waiting for him. He was a slender, pale man in his forties who appeared to be a member of the professional class. A doctor or lawyer, Michael thought, and when he mentioned he was a druggist with a shop near the center of the city it was only a slight surprise.

"I want to ask you about the killing of your friend Juan Diaz," Michael said.

The slender man nodded. "It was terrible. I'd known Juan Diaz most of my life."

"The killer assaulted you first?"

A nod. "We'd brought our robes and hoods to the church hall because we'd be marching from St. Quiteria's to the downtown cathedral." He spoke quickly, in Spanish, but Michael had no trouble understanding him.

"That is where you were attacked?"

The man nodded. "I was alone in the changing room and I'd just donned my robe and hood when I heard someone else enter. I could only see straight ahead through the hood's eyeholes so I started to turn to see who it was. There was a blow to the side of my head and I remember nothing else until I came to in a closet about an hour later. By that time, Juan Diaz was dead."

Michael knew the rest of it. The killer had discarded the robe and hood after stabbing Juan Diaz at the cathedral, then mingled with the crowd of worshipers and escaped. "Did Juan Diaz have any enemies?" he asked the druggist.

"No one. These killings are the random acts of a madman."

"They say he argued with that Gypsy the police were holding."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I know nothing of that. I saw him mainly at church services and meetings of the confraternity."

"What are these brotherhoods? Why do the members hide their faces with hoods?"

"It is an act of penance during Holy Week and at certain other times of the year. Tomorrow, for instance, is the feast day of our patron saint, St. Quiteria. The brotherhood will be present at the High Mass. Our robes and hoods date back hundreds of years. In some parts of the Christian world penitents still scourge themselves and hang from crosses."

"Do you know the Gypsy who was accused?"

"No. I think the case against him was very weak."

"And the earlier victims? Was there any connection between Juan Diaz and the woman tourist, or the old Gypsy?"

"Nothing that I know of."

Michael was frustrated but he tried one more question. "Do you remember anything from the moment you were hit?"

"Nothing."

"Try! A sound, a smell, anything—"

Montoto opened his mouth, then hesitated. "I'm not sure."

"What is it?"

"There was something. It just came back to me now. It was a faint spicy odor. I caught a whiff of it just before I was hit."

"Thank you, Mr. Montoto. That could be of help."

Michael Vlado returned to his hotel. He half expected to find the handsome Garib awaiting him in the lobby, but the local Gypsy was nowhere in sight. It was while he was scanning the lobby chairs and sofas that he happened to glimpse the young woman who appeared to have been eavesdropping on his initial conversation with Garib. He circled around the lobby once, and when he was sure she was watching him he approached her.

"My name is Michael Vlado," he said quietly. "Can I be of help?"

"I—" She stumbled for something to say. "You must be mistaking me for someone else. I'm waiting for a friend." Her dark hair and brown eyes gave her a Mediterranean look although her voice carried the trace of a British accent.

"You've been waiting a long time. I saw you watching me at the atrium the other day."

She closed her eyes for an instant and blushed like a child caught in the candy box. "You're very observant, Mr. Vlado."

"Who are you?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"My name is Samantha Mercer. The Butcher's first victim was my mother."

They found a table in the hotel cocktail lounge and ordered two glasses of white wine. "I'm terribly sorry about your mother," Michael told her. "But why have you been watching me?"

"If you've been investigating the Butcher's crimes you know that my mother and stepfather were vacationing here in February when she was killed. It was a senseless crime. She was struck down in the evening, a block from her hotel, stabbed several times with a large knife. Her purse wasn't touched."

"The Butcher."

"It wasn't until the second killing, a few weeks later, that the press gave him that name. This time it was an elderly Gypsy, sick with asthma, slain in his caravan at the edge of the city. The third one was Juan Diaz, cut down in the cathedral."

"After that the Gypsy Nunzio was arrested."

"And I wanted to believe him guilty, I really did! I wanted to believe anything, so long as my mother's death was avenged." She spoke so intently, with such feeling, that Michael studied her anew. There was definitely a Latin tone to both her coloring and features. She reminded him of a fiery actress he'd once seen playing *Carmen* when he was a young man.

"Pardon me for asking, but was your mother Spanish?"

"What an odd question! Does it show that much? Sometimes she'd tell me I acted like a little spitfire! Yes, Carla was mostly Spanish. My stepfather, John Mercer, is English. I was only eight when my mother remarried and they gave me his name. I still resent that, losing all trace of my real father. And now my mother is gone too."

"What of your stepfather?"

"He's back in England. Mother's death has been a terrible blow to his health, which was never good. He blames himself for not being with her the night it happened."

"Where was he?"

"Back in their hotel room. They'd been here just a few days, driving from Madrid to the Costa del Sol for a winter vacation. A spicy dinner had given them both upset stomachs and she'd gone out to get some antacid pills. The killer found her on the way back."

"But why did you seek me out?" Michael asked.

"I didn't. I was in the lobby of your hotel when you approached me." She pointed with her finger. "Right out there."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'd seen you at the Gypsy Congress," he reminded her.

The dark eyes sparkled. "I came here to learn all I could about my mother's death. Garib told me of your reputation."

"How do you know Garib?"

She hesitated, then spoke out. "It was a deep family secret that my mother had the blood of Spanish Gypsies in her veins. She told me when I was eighteen and swore me to secrecy. As a Gypsy king you certainly must realize her state of mind. In England they are viewed as mostly illiterate troublemakers who beg for money and set up camp on other people's land."

"That's not entirely a false picture," Michael admitted. "Back home in Romania things are a bit different, but I have known Roms who were all the things you say. You still haven't told me how you met Garib."

"Do you know he's to be married tomorrow?"

"I'm invited to the wedding."

She nodded. "His bride and I were at Cambridge together."

"That's interesting. I wonder why he didn't tell me."

"Should he have? We didn't even meet until just now."

She was right, of course. But the fact of her mother's Gypsy blood stuck in his mind. That meant two of the three victims had been Roms. They chatted awhile longer, but Samantha Mercer could tell him nothing more. When they parted he said he'd look for her at the wedding.

By the following morning all but the local Rom delegates had departed. Michael had breakfast in the hotel lobby without seeing a single person he knew. Garib had phoned his room to extend the wedding invitation once more, and Michael assured him he would attend. The traditional Rom ceremony in the early afternoon was to be followed by a more formal wedding later at a Catholic church. Like many Roms, those in the Seville area had adopted the local religion, in this case Catholic, and attended the parish churches.

The hotel where Carla Mercer had been staying when she was killed was just along the street from Michael's, and he walked down there to look at it. There was nothing to be seen except for some Gypsy children begging coins from tourists.

The Gypsy encampment was a large place at the edge of Seville, an area of open fields filled with caravans. Many were motorized, but a large number were the traditional horse-drawn wagons used by travelers for centuries. In addition, there were a dozen or so cars,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

no doubt belonging to friends from the city. Michael had taken a taxi out to the encampment, assuming there'd be someone to drive him back to his hotel.

The first person he recognized as he approached the area of the festivities was Nunzio Sorja, the accused man he'd helped to free from jail. Michael was surprised to see him, though he shouldn't have been. The encampment was the logical place for Nunzio to go, and Garib had probably arranged it.

Michael greeted him with a handshake. "Are you enjoying your freedom?"

"Certainly, thanks to you and Garib. I am pleased to join in their wedding celebration. Have you met the bride?"

"No, I haven't."

He conducted Michael to a small group of young women clustered around a beaming girl, barely out of her teens, who wore the traditional Rom bridal costume. "This is Quiteria," he said, introducing Michael.

He took her hand. "Quiteria, what a pretty name! There is a church by that name."

She nodded, her wide smile full of a bride's happiness. "We will have the Catholic ceremony there later today. St. Quiteria was a virgin and martyr, widely revered in this area. The people still love her, even though the Church of Rome now doubts she ever lived."

"But you are living," Michael told her, "and I wish you every happiness with my friend Garib."

"Come see the ceremony," she said as the other girls hurried her away. "It will start soon."

"A charming young woman," Nunzio said, watching her run with the others. Then he turned his attention back to Michael Vlado. "Will you be returning home soon?"

"Probably tomorrow. Garib was afraid that once you were released the Butcher would kill again in an effort to implicate you, but it hasn't happened."

"Not yet."

"You never did tell me about your fight with Juan Diaz."

"He was an overweight man with bad breath and an asthmatic wheeze. Obviously he hated Roms. We had words and I shoved him. I never hit him as he claimed. But he reported it to the police and I was questioned by them. Later, when they needed a scapegoat for the Butcher slayings, they came after me."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He was standing close as he spoke and for the first time Michael detected a faint spicy odor such as he'd noticed before around Rom encampments. It stirred something in his memory, something about the killings. But before he could think about it there were shouts from the others, summoning them to the wedding ceremony.

As the Rom community gathered round and Gypsy music was played on two violins, the tall, handsome Garib and the smiling Quiteria approached one another. Michael saw now that her classic Rom features were almost Oriental, with large dark eyes set off by arched eyebrows. Her thin lips and high cheekbones gave her a beauty one rarely saw even among Rom women. Garib was a lucky man.

The ceremony was an old tradition, rarely seen in Gypsy communities in these modern times. The groom knelt on his left knee, and Quiteria on her right knee facing him. The best man approached bearing pieces of bread which he placed on both their knees, then sprinkled the bread with salt. Garib bent over and took the bread from his bride's knee with his mouth, and she did likewise with his bread. As they ate it the best man chanted, "Good fortune and happiness be with you. And even if salt and bread become enemies, may you live in happiness and harmony." A cheer went up from the crowd as the bridal couple rose to their feet and kissed.

Michael was one of the first to congratulate the groom. "It is a happy day," Garib admitted. "Now we'll get the Catholic ceremony over with and we'll be truly married in the eyes of church and state."

Michael got a ride with Nunzio and before long the parade of cars was heading into Seville, bound for the Church of St. Quiteria. He remembered Montoto mentioning that this was the feast day of the saint, and it seemed like a coincidence until he realized that the Gypsy Quiteria must have chosen this as her wedding day for exactly that reason.

The church's own ceremonies were just ending as the wedding party arrived, and a young priest hurried out to tell them that the wedding would be delayed about fifteen minutes. Michael entered the rear of the church and watched while the hooded members of the parish brotherhood filed out. They were unrecognizable in their robes and head coverings, but Michael realized that Montoto was the only one he knew anyway.

He followed them next-door to the rectory hall and found the penitents removing their ceremonial costumes. Enrique Montoto spotted him at once and came over in his robe, holding the pointed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gold hood. "You have honored us on our feast day," he said.

"Actually I'm here for the Rom wedding that follows in a few minutes," he told Montoto. "These costumes are really striking."

"Each parish tries to outdo the others."

"Can I try on the hood?"

The slender man hesitated. "Only for a moment. You are not of the brotherhood."

The conical shape, like a dunce cap with a mask attached, reached from his chest to a couple of feet above his head. He found the effect stifling, and could smell only the coarse fabric of the cloth pressed against his nose and mouth. He was relieved to remove it. "I wouldn't want to wear that on a hot day."

"Happily, they are worn only during Holy Week, and in a few parishes on the patron saint's day. We store them here the rest of the time."

"Are there ever any women members of these organizations?"

"Women?" He seemed puzzled by the question. "Well, of course not! A brotherhood is a brotherhood."

Others were coming up to chat with Montoto, and Michael drifted away. He went back outside to find the wedding party filing into the church as the last of the worshipers at the previous service departed. He had attended Catholic marriage ceremonies before, and he watched the exchange of vows and the Mass that followed with interest.

As they filed out after the ceremony, he spotted a familiar face. It was Samantha Mercer, daughter of the Butcher's first victim. He remembered suddenly that she had been at Cambridge with Quiteria. "I didn't see you at the Rom ceremony."

"I couldn't get there, but at least I made this one. She's a beautiful bride."

"She certainly is!" Michael agreed. "Have you known the groom long?"

"Almost as long as Quiteria has. He'll make her a wonderful husband. They'll be living in Madrid, away from the caravans."

"As your mother did."

"She was only part Rom, remember. She was an Englishwoman living in London, as I am."

"You came here for the wedding?"

She nodded.

"You must have come when your mother was killed too, to help with your father."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Of course. Her murder was a terrible shock to everyone. He was absolutely helpless. He hasn't been well."

"How was your mother's health?"

"Pretty good. She took something, potassium iodide, on occasion. I'm not even sure what it was for."

They were interrupted by Nunzio, who'd brought along a camera and insisted on including them in a group shot with some other guests. The reception was being held at a nearby restaurant, and Garib and his bride led the way on foot through the streets with the entire wedding party trailing along. Michael remained with Samantha Mercer for a time, then broke off from the group to speak with Garib as they reached the restaurant.

"This is your great day, my friend. I wanted to say I must return home to Romania in the morning."

"With the mystery unsolved?"

"Nunzio has been out of jail for several days now and there has been no new crime. In fact it is almost eight weeks since the Holy Week murder of Juan Diaz. I believe we can safely assume that the so-called Butcher has ceased his killing, or moved on."

"A cloud still hangs over Nunzio's head."

"The life of a Rom is not easy these days, as you know. A cloud hangs over all our heads."

Garib nodded and offered his hand. "Thank you for what you were able to do. Your voice at the Congress helped set him free."

Michael remained at the wedding reception for some hours, and even returned to the caravans for further celebration. Sitting around the campfire while the young people danced and Gypsy violins played the traditional songs reminded him of his youth in Romania after the war. Then all things seemed possible. Had Europe and the world changed so much since those days?

It was the middle of the night when Nunzio dropped him at his hotel. He sat up for a long time, almost till dawn, and then slept briefly, pursued in his dreams by knife-wielding butchers in tall pointed hats.

After breakfast he telephoned a doctor recommended by the hotel and asked him what potassium iodide was used for. Michael had already guessed what the answer would be, just as he'd already guessed the identity of the Butcher of Seville.

Michael's only previous meeting with Captain Lerida of the Seville Police had been on the day Nunzio Sorja was released from jail.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lerida was a busy man with little time to spend with visiting Gypsies, something he made quite clear at the beginning of their conversation in his cluttered little office. "I can give you ten minutes," he told Michael. "No more."

"It may take longer than that to explain my theory."

The captain smiled indulgently. "We have had twenty detectives working full-time on the Butcher slayings for months. Do you expect to walk in here and tell me the mystery is solved?"

"I think so, yes."

He glanced at his watch. "You have eight minutes left."

"A so-called serial killer is always difficult to capture because of the randomness of his crimes. Your Butcher seemed no different. A visiting English tourist was struck down near her hotel, an elderly Spanish Gypsy died in his caravan, and a member of a parish brotherhood was killed inside the cathedral. They were certainly a diverse group, in sex, age, nationality, and social status."

"That is true."

"Even though I learned the Englishwoman had some Gypsy blood and her daughter had Gypsy friends, there still seemed no link among these victims."

"There was none. We checked every possibility," Captain Lerida insisted.

"And yet, look closely at the circumstances of the third killing. Enrique Montoto was attacked and knocked unconscious at his parish church by a killer who took his place and marched in the procession to commit a murder at the cathedral."

"He is insane, of course."

"Insane perhaps, but hardly random. If the third killing was random, why didn't he simply kill Montoto instead of knocking him out? It was safer and more certain than killing someone later at the cathedral, where escape would be difficult. No, Captain, the third killing was far from random, and that means the first two may not have been random either."

"What could they possibly have had in common?"

"They all had asthma."

Enrique Montoto, wearing a neat white pharmacist's coat, glanced up as Michael Vlado entered the little drugstore down the street from the tourist hotels. He smiled and asked, "May I help you?" Then he said, "It's Vlado, isn't it? I didn't know you were still in town."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm just wrapping up a few loose ends about the killings."

"What would those be?" he asked with a smile.

"You told me you could smell a faint spicy odor just before the killer knocked you unconscious, but when I tried on your hood later I could smell nothing except the strong odor of the fabric itself. I wondered if your so-called spicy odor was an attempt to implicate Gypsies in the killings. I wondered if you had really been replaced at all. Perhaps in the instant before his death Juan Diaz saw his killer's face and it was not the face of a stranger after all. Perhaps it was the face of his good friend Enrique."

"Why should I kill him?" the druggist asked. His smile had faded.

"Samantha Mercer, the first victim's daughter, told me that the next victim was an elderly Gypsy with asthma. Later Nunzio told me that Juan Diaz had an asthmatic wheeze. And Samantha told me her mother was taking potassium iodide, a common medication to loosen phlegm in asthmatics. What if all three received the wrong medication through some terrible error? What if the druggist responsible for the error decided to cover his tracks by killing them, in a brutal manner so there'd be no doubts, no detailed autopsy that might uncover the deadly medication they'd been given?"

"You are accusing me of this?" He'd retreated behind his counter, putting it between him and Michael. "Why would they come here for their medication, even if your fairy tale is true?"

"Carla Mercer went to a drugstore near her hotel the night she died, for antacid tablets. The old Gypsy used to come to the tourist hotels to beg for money. And Juan Diaz might naturally patronize the store of his good friend Enrique. They all came here, and later, when you realized what you'd done, you killed them all. You had time, apparently, because it was a slow-acting poison they were taking. You stalked them and killed them and made it appear the work of some mad serial killer. You had their names and addresses, of course, so you knew where to find them. Mrs. Mercer had to die first, before she returned to England. You saved Juan Diaz till last because he was your friend."

The slender man nodded, as if remembering. "I didn't want to kill him. I swore I wouldn't unless he showed signs that the poison was affecting him. When those signs came, he had to die. I lured him out of line in the back of the cathedral and when he saw the sharpened bayonet he was certain it was someone else. He pulled off my hood to see, but of course it was his old friend Enrique after all."

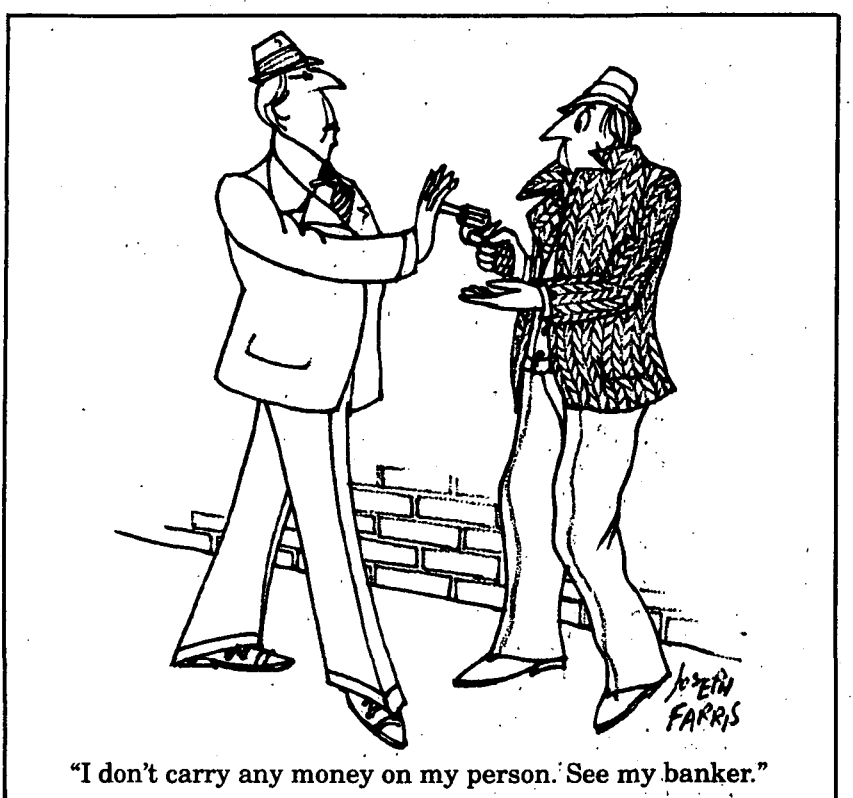
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You could have told them the truth, taken back the poison before it was fatal."

"And have my whole life ruined? They would have called the police, sued me, hounded me to my grave. It was better that they die like this. They were dying anyway." His hand came out from behind the counter, holding not a bloody bayonet but a small Beretta pistol. "And now one more Gypsy dies, trying to steal drugs."

"The police are outside," Michael told him. "They've heard every word you've said."

The door opened and Captain Lerida entered the drugstore. For a moment Enrique seemed confused. Then he put down his pistol and smiled, the perfect businessman. "May I help you today?" he asked. ●



"I don't carry any money on my person. See my banker."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

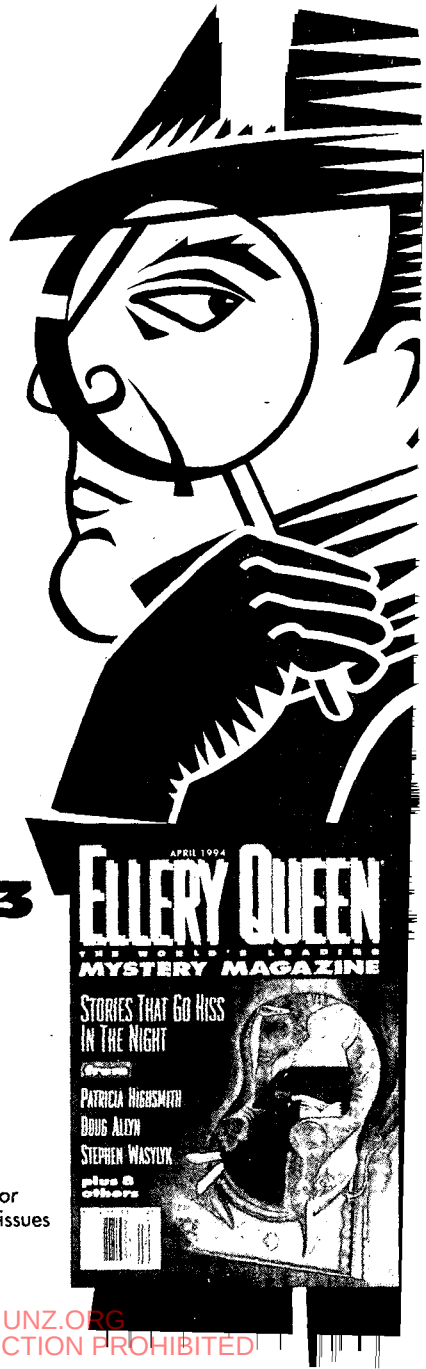
cribe to Ellery Queen's
ystery Magazine and enjoy
-sue after issue of spine-
ngling suspense stories,
umorous detectiverses, and
sightful reviews of current
ystery novels.

TOLL FREE
-800-333-3053

BY MAIL
Ellery Queen
P.O. Box 5127
Harlan, IA 51593

HPNC-6

In U S receive 18 issues for only $29 97 or 12 issues for $20 97 Outside U S & Poss ,18 issues for $39 97, 12 issues for $27 97 All foreign orders must be paid in U S currency Canadian orders include GST Please allow four to six weeks for delivery of your first issue
We publish two double issues, in March and October. These count as two each towards your subscription



ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a *NEW* short story by

BARBARA CALLAHAN

This month we are featuring stories by an unusually large number of authors who have made their mystery short story debut in EQMM. *Besides our two Department of First Stories features, we have contributions by former Department of First Story-ers Terry Mullins, Steven Saylor, and Joan Richter, and by British writers Jeffry Scott and Ruth Rendell, whose first U.S. short story publication was with* EQMM. *To their number we add Barbara Callahan, who appeared in the Department of First Stories in 1974. Ms. Callahan has written at least a dozen stories for us since, although we haven't had from her before a satire as broad as this one . . .*

TALKED OUT OF IT

by BARBARA CALLAHAN

Ricardo wanted me. Maurice wanted me. Zazu wanted me. All those daytime TV show hosts wanted me to appear as a guest. It was a bit overwhelming. Ever since the tabloid *SLEEZ* printed my story and told where I worked, I'd been hounded by producers. They jumped out of cars in the parking lot of the We Never Sleep convenience store, falling all over each other to get to me first. Some of my regular customers got real mad, like Hector Goertz, the town cabbie.

"I come in here every morning, Ruth Anne, expecting fresh coffee, and what do I get lately? Some stuff that's been sitting out all night and tastes like diesel fuel because you've been larking around with the blow-dry crowd. Well, I can take my business elsewhere."

I felt bad because there is no elsewhere. No other store is open at 5:30 when Hector goes to work. Instead of sympathizing with Hector,

© *1995 by Barbara Callahan.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the *Ricardo* producer laughed and told me I should chuck my job and take the "big bucks we can offer." Then the *Maurice* producer shoved the *Ricardo* producer into the Spuds potato chip display and told me his show could top Ricardo's offer any day. His comment amused the *Zazu* producer, who said, "We can top their paltry fees any day. And naturally, we want Billy on the show, too. He'd like that, wouldn't he?"

Billy is my ex-boyfriend who is now my current boyfriend and is responsible for this national interest. After I won him back in a bingo game from my ex-friend Sally Sue, Billy contacted *SLEEZ* with our story. Sally Sue and I have been competing for Billy's affections for ten years, since junior year in high school, and we have done some bizarre things to take him away from each other. The *SLEEZ* headline read, "Bingo! Ruth Anne Wins Billy."

SLEEZ ran pictures of the three of us, right there on the front page, the one everyone looks at in the supermarket checkout lines. Billy was so proud. He went to the market and while I shopped, he posed himself right next to the *SLEEZ* rack. He had a pen in hand, ready to sign autographs, but nobody recognized him. Maybe it's because Billy sent *SLEEZ* his high-school photograph, the one where he looks like Sylvester Stallone with a crew cut. And Sally Sue's and my cooking have added a few chins to his original one.

It was a real challenge winning Billy back. I had to cover the four corners on eight bingo cards under the rules Sally Sue and I agreed on. At first, Billy seemed happy to be with me, but lately he'd been acting bored. I think it was our living quarters. "I'm too mobile for a mobile home," he said. That's because Billy used to drive a truck before his sciatica forced him to spend his days on the sofa, drinking beer and watching TV.

I hadn't told him about the letters the three TV producers sent me before they came to the store because Billy always makes fun of the guests on daytime TV shows. When he saw the *Zazu* show with the man who actually does go out and sleep in the dog house when his wife is mad at him, Billy hooted about him for days.

Being pursued by three gentlemen who shave and change their shirts every day should have been a boost for my dysfunctional self-esteem (Billy teaches me those terms he learns from the TV therapists), but it didn't. I lost my job that day. Hector complained to the owner of the store, who came in and saw me talking to the producers instead of waiting on customers. That and the bags of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

potato chips squished by the *Maurice* producer made the owner say it was the last straw.

Billy would have said something funny like, "You mean the last chip," but I don't have that quick sense of humor.

When Billy saw how depressed I was about losing my job, he actually got off the sofa and opened a can of tortellini-o's for our lunch. It was thoughtful things like that that made me love Billy so much and gave me the strength to battle Sally Sue over the years for his affection.

"Now tell me all about it, hon," Billy said.

As I sobbed out the story of the three producers, Billy sat thoughtfully scratching his belly. He didn't laugh or snort about them wanting us to go on TV like I thought he would. Even through my tears I could tell that Billy was planning something or "taking charge of his life" as the TV therapists put it. After I finished my story, right down to the un-Elvis-like curl of my boss's lips, Billy burped, a sure sign that he was about to say something deep.

He handed me a Kleenex and said, "Hon, you just dry those tears. We want your eyes all nice and sparkly for those three TV shows."

"Three?" I gasped.

"Why sure. There's enough of you for all three. And me too."

"But I thought you didn't like those shows," I said.

"Well, usually I don't, hon, but that's before I knew there'd be some monetary compensation."

I loved it when Billy used big words. I got all tingly. When I recovered, I asked him how we could possibly be on three shows at once.

"Not at once, at staggered times. Heck, those shows use the same people all the time. I saw that dog-house guy on *Ricardo* the week after *Zazu* and on *Maurice* the week after *Ricardo.*"

Billy patted his belly contentedly and gave me a little pat on the thigh of my Lady Bountiful slacks. Sweet gestures like that made me love Billy so much. He never poked fun at my weight without poking fun at his too, although on him it looked cute.

"Now you just relax and finish clipping the hedges around the trailer while I put my mind to our problem. And don't worry about paying bills. That money from *SLEEZ* paid off my bookie, all except five hundred dollars, and he's willing to wait a couple of weeks for that. And the phone company and electric company's been real understanding since I told them you'd been kidnapped by aliens and soon as you got back from Mars, you'd pay."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Billy sure can put things in perspective. I was actually humming as I attacked the hedges, which had grown too high for me even to see the mobile home across from us. What with working two shifts at the convenience store and tending to the housework and laundry, I had really let the hedges go. But lunch with Billy had cured my guilt about the hedges and losing my job. As one of the TV therapists that Billy liked to quote said, "Don't cry over spilt guilt. It's better out than in. We're all victims."

After fifteen minutes, I wiped the sweat out of my eyes and looked at the home across the way. It had been for sale but somebody had bought it and moved in. The home sported frilly new curtains and a flock of wooden sheep with curly wool grazing on the lawn. I couldn't wait to tell Billy. I'd be the one with humor for a change.

"Hey, Billy, hon," I'd say, "Little Bo Beep has moved in across the way."

And Billy would say something funny like, "Well, I'll be Little Jack Horner stuck in a corner," or something clever like that.

But I didn't have a chance to test out my new comedy routine. Billy came outside, squinted in the sunlight, and plopped down on a lawn chair from the exertion.

"Hey, Ruth Anne, hon," he said, "look across the way. Little Sally Sue is waving howdy-do."

I spun around and laid eyes on my enemy herself, Sally Sue Bilodeau. There she stood in the middle of those smiling sheep looking like she was feeding them silly pills. The sight of her waving amidst those grinning animals gave me a weak spell and I fell backwards onto the lap of Billy, who said, "Oosh," as we tumbled to the ground. Luckily we weren't hurt, but unluckily our collapse gave Sally Sue the excuse to scurry over and coo, "Are you hurt, Billy? Do you feel a great weight on your chest? I've had CPR training."

The great weight on Billy's chest rolled off and scrambled to her feet.

"I'll count to three and you'd better be out of here, Sally Sue," I snarled. "Your silly sheep need tending."

Sally Sue dimpled prettily and brushed back a wisp of her long blond hair. She wears the same style she did in high school when she was voted "Most Likely to Dye Early."

"Why, Ruth Anne," she simpered, "I just thought I'd move close by so you wouldn't have to walk so far to deliver Billy when I win him back. I've got a great idea. We've never played horseshoes for Billy and I've got a brand new set."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When I waved the hedge clippers menacingly, Sally Sue covered her Rapunzel tresses with both hands.

"No more bets for Billy, Sally Sue. The bingo game was the grand finale."

During this exchange Billy just grinned. Sometimes I believed that he enjoyed us bickering over him, but he always stepped in, or created an intervention as the TV therapists put it, before Sally Sue and I did each other harm.

On that afternoon Billy's intervention stopped us cold. "Hey, hons," he hollered, "you'd better save your energies for the talk shows us three are going on."

"Us three?" I squeaked.

"Sure, us three. The whole story's about a love triangle and a triangle has three sides, ergo, us three have got to go."

Ergo. What a word! I just loved it when Billy talked foreign. That word just melted all my hostilities toward Sally Sue. Billy cracked open a couple of cans of beer while he filled Sally Sue in, and I took three business cards out of my handbag and called the producers. They sounded happy to hear from me. The *Ricardo Show,* scheduled for three weeks from the day I lost my job, would be our first.

After the phone calls, Sally Sue and I went into training, and Billy acted as our coach. His pep talk really motivated us.

"Now hons, you have got to look good on those TV shows. You've got to go out there and make me proud that you both are fighting over me. As of now, you are in training. Ruth Anne, no more tortellini-o's, just parsley and prunes. And I'll develop an exercise program for you too, hon. And Sally Sue, hon, you've got to get a haircut."

"Oh no," she cried.

"Oh yes," thundered Billy, hands on hips, baseball cap pushed low on his forehead, a natural coach if there ever was one. Billy didn't thunder often but I loved it when he did.

Eyes narrowed, Billy said, "Sally Sue, your hair falls over your face and you look like a sheep dog. Do you want millions of viewers to think that I would want to be returned to a sheep dog?"

"No, Billy. I'll go to the beauty shop tomorrow," she sighed.

"They'll have their work cut out for them," I quipped. "Let me do it. I have the hedge clippers."

"Now, now, team," Billy chided, "no infighting. We're the Three Talk-Showteers. Let's get to work. Ruth Anne, you jog to the newsstand and get me *Racing News*. It'll do wonders for your weight.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And Sally Sue, you tie your hair back and read me the list of TV shows on this week. Real nice and low. We've got to work on your voice. It's too high-pitched. We don't want our viewers turning off their sets because their dogs are running away from home."

Three weeks of intensive training followed. The coach posted my daily routine to the refrigerator:

5 A.M. Rise and shine, Ruth Anne, but quietly. Coach needs his rest. Three-mile jog to Yummy Donuts for 2 jellies, 2 raspberry-coconut, and 2 lemon creme for Coach.

7 A.M. Exercise along with Tessie Torquemada's videotape, *Shoo, Shoo Cellulite.*

7:45 A.M. Eat breakfast of Oatsies, topped with prunes, garnished with sprigs of parsley.

8:00 A.M. to 11:30 A.M. Split logs on empty lot next to trailer to earn money for Billy's talk-show wardrobe. Look what that activity did for Abe Lincoln, ha, ha, ha.

11:30 A.M. to 11:35 A.M. Take a break.

11:35 A.M. to 12:00 P.M. Dig up vegetables from your garden and prepare them for your lunch.

12:01 P.M. Bring donuts and coffee into Billy's room.

12:02 P.M. to 12:17 P.M. Eat lunch. Menu: Raw Carrots Jardiniere, Turnips au Naturel, and Summer Squash au Jus.

12:18 P.M. to 12:28 P.M. Make living room presentable for Talk Show Seminar given by Coach. Be sure to dust off TV screen and get the cat off recliner.

12:29 P.M. Admit Sally Sue to Seminar. She doesn't need a ticket, ha, ha, ha.

12:30 P.M. to 1:00 P.M. Seminar commences. Coach lectures on talk-show etiquette, such as sucking up to the host and listening as if you really cared to phone-in callers who make no sense at all.

1:01 P.M. to 4:00 P.M. Field trip for seminar students and instructor. We adjourn to Sally Sue's trailer to watch three hours of talk shows. Bring your exercycle, Ruth Anne.

4:01 P.M. to 5:30 P.M. Tackle that ironing, Ruth Anne. It's climbing up to the Casablanca fan. As time goes by (ha, ha), I don't want any more shirts parachuting into my soup.

5:31 P.M. to 7:00 P.M. Prepare my dinner. I'm easy. Anything in a cream sauce, like fettuccini Ruth Anne-o, accompanied by any brand of gourmet beer. No salads or veggies, please. They're for you. Do dishes and set up my hammock in the yard.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

7:01 P.M. to 8:00 P.M. Seminar students gather round the hammock for the instructor's critique of the day's talk-show guests.

8:01 P.M. to 9:10 P.M. Sally Sue's voice lessons with Henry Higgins, ha, ha, ha. Ruth Anne, take your evening jog to the Cream de la Cream shop for my nightly quart of Ginger Snap Gourmet Ice Cream. (No dawdling, Ruth Anne. I like my women soft but not my ice cream, ha, ha ha.)

9:15 P.M. to Whenever P.M. Free Time.

Oh, that Billy! Free time! Free time for taking my Z's. After a quick shower, I'd crawl to my bed and fall asleep to the hypnotic drone of Sally Sue in the living room doing her voice lessons with Billy by reading aloud from the phone book.

"Aaronson, Malachi, four-one-four Wyoming Avenue, five-five-five–nine-oh-two-three; Aaronson, Rupert, one-two-five Woodcrest Road, five-five-five–nine-oh-eight-seven; Aaronson, Vera, one-two-four Curtis Avenue, five-five-five–oh-nine-six-five." At each new phone listing Billy would bark, "Lower, lower!" until Sally Sue sounded like she could do justice to "Old Man River."

By the end of the second week, my Lady Bountifuls were feeling loose, so Billy canceled his Wednesday seminar so that Sally Sue and I could go shopping for outfits for the shows. We were so excited to have a three-hour pass from boot camp that we giggled like school girls. Or I should say, giggled like a school girl and a school boy. Sally Sue's giggle had dropped several octaves. I let out a whoop when I found out that I had gone down two sizes. Sally Sue agreed that the mauve pantsuit with the fuchsia scarf that I picked out would be perfect for the show.

The saleswoman who had her back turned when Sally Sue asked directions to the petite department for her outfit answered, "Through the arch and to your right, sir." Instead of being surprised at the saleswoman's mistake, Sally Sue was pleased. "Billy's lessons are working," she said. However, when Sally Sue came out of the dressing room wearing a beige mini-dress that matched the color of her new short haircut and asked me how I liked it, I thought that she looked and sounded like a female impersonator. But hey, there are plenty of those on TV talk shows too, so I told her she looked cool.

Billy approved of our purchases and said we had done so well that he was canceling the seminars altogether so that we could shop for his Ricardo/Maurice/Zazu outfits. Billy thought it only right, since he was the pursued and therefore the central figure in our drama,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that he should have a different outfit for each show. It was Billy's stand-up guy honesty that made me love him so. Sally Sue pouted, but I think her sore throat had put her out of sorts.

For Ricardo, who's rather low-key, Billy chose a subdued red, yellow, and green plaid blazer; silk tie painted with Van Gogh look-alike sunflowers; and Statement! jeans. Those loafers with the cute little tassels added, as Billy put it, a "je ne sais quoi" touch to the ensemble. Oh, that Billy and foreign words! Sally Sue and I should have begun to suspect that his fashion sense and language skills would attract other women.

For Maurice, who's somewhat manic, Billy decided on a biker motif. We had to do massive mall-crawls to find the perfect foundation for his look. At Rip-Off Tees, we finally found it: a dynamite black T-shirt that looked as if its sleeves had been cut off by a reckless three-year-old. The store owner assured us of the authenticity of its prewrinkled fabric. The Neckrowfiles Biker Club had placed it on Highway One and run over it thirty times. Billy reverently handed it to the clerk, amazed that the relic cost only seventy-five dollars.

The tee really set off the studded denim vest and oil-slicked jeans he wore, but the most masterful touch was the fake tattoo. At the decal store, Billy bought four letters and let us each put two on his right bicep to spell H-O-N-S. Since Billy called us both hon, we were each represented on his arm. A real diplomat, that Billy, but why hadn't he gotten a permanent tattoo?

For Zazu, who's quite the lady, brimming with concern for the world, Billy decided on environmental correctness. He bought everything at Rita's Recycled Rags: a burlap suit that made him sneeze a lot; a pink shirt fashioned from plastic shopping bags; and squeaky white shoes made from takeout containers from fast-food restaurants from which catsup and relish stains had carefully been removed.

Our costumes in place, all that remained was for us to be briefed. When we arrived on the *Ricardo* set two hours ahead of taping, Yvette, the associate producer, escorted us into the green room and filled us in.

"Although we strive for spontaneity on *Ricardo,* we are not above making some suggestions that will enliven the show. In your case," she said, eyes flashing, "we want hostility."

The way she almost shouted the word *hostility* made Sally Sue and me jump, but Billy took it in stride, just sat there gaping at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Yvette like she was a New York attraction, which in a slickly beautiful, overly made-up way she was. Just before we went on the set, she growled at Sally Sue and me, "Go out there and fight for your man." Her voice softened, though, when she wished Billy luck and kissed him smack on the lips.

Yvette's send-off to us really created the mood she wanted. Eyes blazing, nostrils flaring, we brought the right amount of anger to the set, but not with each other—anger at Billy for ogling Yvette and enjoying her kiss. When we made our entrance, our man beamed brighter than any of those lights on the set. Sally Sue looked like she wanted to shut off the switch behind his eyes, but Billy, as he took the center chair of the three set up for us, winked her a coy Billy wink and gave my hand a firm Billy squeeze. It was like he was telling us, hey, I can play the game too. Oh, that Billy! His incredible timing made me redirect my hostility back at Sally Sue like I was supposed to.

Ricardo, who tends to ooze sincerity, told the beginning of our story to the audience—the gymnastics contest we arranged in high school to see who would take Billy to the prom (I did. I held onto the parallel bars three seconds longer than Sally Sue, but I had to wear gauze on my hands to the dance). During Ricardo's recital he scratched his head and frowned quite a bit to convey his sincere puzzlement over our actions, but his hostly need to stir things up made him jab us a bit as he told about the bingo game, before delivering the knockout question.

Turning to us, Ricardo asked, "Is the contest wearing you girls out? I mean, going from parallel bars to four-corner bingo indicates a steep decline in physical ability. What's happened to you?"

Before Sally Sue or I could respond, Billy winked at the audience and said, "They've gotten older."

By emphasizing "they" and removing himself from the aging process, Billy Peter-Panned himself into the hearts of the audience, who laughed appreciatively. Once again, Ricardo attempted to direct his attention to Sally Sue and me.

"I have here a list," he said, "of the various antics you two have undertaken in this yo-yo match for Billy. By the way, have you ever set up a yo-yo contest for Billy?"

Before Sally Sue or I could answer, Billy piped up with, "Nah, they never yo-yoed for this yo-yo."

The audience howled. Billy's cute self-mockery went over big. Ricardo scowled at him, but Billy kept his eyes riveted on the camera.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"May I have your permission to read this list, Billy?" Ricardo asked, oozing sarcasm instead of sincerity.

"Oh, be my guest," Billy answered.

Ricardo flashed Billy the kind of withering schoolteacher look reserved for the class cutup before bellowing, "No, Billy, be MY guest and observe the politeness expected of guests."

A grandmotherly-looking woman in the audience shouted, "Oh, lighten up, Ricardo. You're too full of yourself."

Ricardo bounded off the stage and sprinted toward her. Dimpling appealingly, he handed her the mike and said, "Well, how would you handle this guest?"

"Handle him? Where, in my hot tub or in my waterbed?"

The audience roared. Ricardo worked up a blush and said, "Why grandma, what big hormones you have!"

Grandma grinned and pinched Ricardo's bottom.

"You can say that again, Ricky," she yelled as the host raced back to the stage.

Somehow my natural good-heartedness kicked in and I wanted to rescue Ricardo.

"I'd like to hear what you have on that list, Ricardo," I said.

Gratefully, he turned to me. "And so you shall, my dear. Here we go. After the gymnastics contest, there was the roping event for which you and Sally Sue studied lassoing to prepare to capture Billy. Am I correct, Sally Sue?"

After having been a spectator for so long, Sally Sue had kind of settled into the role. She looked at Ricardo blankly, then squeaked, "Yes, sir," completely forgetting the voice lessons that had made her a baritone. Her failure gave Henry Higgins the opening to speak for her.

"A regular Annie Oakley she was, too," Billy said, then tugged shyly at his cowlick. Slipping into movie cowpoke-ese, he added, "Shucks, I plum forgit that Annie was a sharpshooter. What I shoulda' said was that Sally Sue was a wonderful roper, a regular Wilhelmina Rogers, right?"

When the audience hooted in agreement, there was no stopping Billy. Ricardo might as well have gone into the green room to take a nap.

Seizing center stage, Billy worked the audience like a pro. "And I'll bet you all would like a demo of just how the little lady roped me, wouldn't you?"

The audience applauded wildly.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yvette, hon, you just bring out that equipment I sent to you."

Yvette entered the stage holding the lasso at arm's length as if it were a snake ready to spring.

"Here," she told Billy.

As she turned to sashay off the set, Billy, like the emcee he had become, shouted at the audience, "Let's give the little lady a big hand."

Once more the audience applauded wildly. I stole a glance at Ricardo, who was off to the side miming his need for an aspirin to a stagehand.

Billy gestured to Sally Sue who obediently went over to him, looking as relaxed as a wax-museum dummy. For the first time, my heart went out to my opponent.

"Now folks, this here is Sally Sue. She won me in a roping contest. And let me tell you, she's good. And that ain't no bull."

Oh, that Billy! Didn't I say once before that Billy's timing was incredible? Well, it didn't fail him on the *Ricardo Show*. As soon as he said bull, Billy pulled two little horns from his pocket and Velcroed them to his head. After snorting cutely and pawing the floor, Billy was ready for roping. He pranced away from Sally Sue, then lowered his head and playfully charged her.

Remembering her voice lessons, Sally Sue swallowed the second half of a squeal. As Billy gamboled around the stage, she twirled the lasso masterfully, tossed it high in the air, and snagged Ricardo. That critter didn't respond well to roping. The glance he gave Sally Sue as he threw her the rope was toxic. Poor Sally Sue lost her confidence and before Yvette removed her from the set, she had lassoed an overhead light, the zoom camera, and the show's psychologist, Dr. Anna Floyd. All during Sally Sue's disgrace, Billy pirouetted, do-si-doed, did the electric slide, and bunny-hopped all over the stage and down the aisle into the audience. His performance that day inspired the dance craze, The Billy.

When the applause finally died down, Dr. Anna Floyd, who, with her highlighted bob and supermodel figure, didn't look like any doctor I ever went to, instantly proclaimed our diagnosis.

"A remarkable case," she said. "It surpasses *folie à deux,* the abnormality in which two people perform acts they would never have done if they hadn't met. Sally Sue, Ruth Anne, and Billy are engaged in *folie à trois,* a condition in which three people exploit one another's weaknesses."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Believing he had at last regained control of his show, Ricardo shoved the mike under the nose of a mild-looking woman in the audience who shouted, *"Folie à deux* to you too, Floyd. You're the crazy one. Billy's just fine."

After some of the audience started dancing The Billy in the aisles, Ricardo quickly led into the phone-call segment of the show. The dancers sat down to applaud every pro-Billy caller. And there were many, their comments ranging from, "He's adorable and cuddly," to, "He's worth every hair-pulling contest those two ever got into."

That comment riled me. I raised my hand to attract Ricardo's attention, but he ignored me. I wanted to tell the world that Sally Sue and I never pulled hair. We maintained our dignity throughout. I thought Billy would defend us but he just tugged at his cowlick and smirked. Oh, that Billy! He was loving every minute of the Billyfest. Sally Sue looked about to cry and I felt about ready to lose my parsley and prune breakfast.

An unlikely knight rode the telephone wires to our rescue.

"Hey, Ricardo," rasped a gravelly voice. "I want to address my comments to Sally Sue and Ruth Anne."

"Sure," answered Ricardo. "Just give us your first name and where you're from."

"Just call me Bruno from the Bronx."

"Okay, Bruno from the Bronx, talk to the girls."

"They ain't girls, Ricardo. They're women."

"Oh, sorry," dimpled Ricardo.

"Ruth Anne and Sally Sue, I'm a sensitive, caring, nineties kind of guy and I am deeply disturbed that a creep like Billy should dominate you."

"Thanks," mumbled Sally Sue and I.

"You two should get on with your lives and I am in a profession that can help you do that."

Dr. Anna Floyd looked threatened. "Psychology is the only profession that can help them, Bruno. Are you a therapist?"

Bruno chuckled. "You might say that, Doc. I do solve a lot of problems. Now back to Sally Sue and Ruth Anne. Women, my profession, the one I use on my tax returns, is elimination specialist."

"Waste disposal?" queried Ricardo.

"Yeah, I waste a lot of people. And I could do a beautiful job on Billy. I wouldn't even charge a fee. I'd do it for nothing for the sake of all the sensitive, caring, nineties kind of guys like me who are out here. Just say the word."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The audience gasped, Ricardo froze, Billy choked, Dr. Anna Floyd sneezed, Sally Sue frowned, and I grinned.

"Well thanks, Bruno," I said. "Let me think it over."

"Sure," he answered. "I ain't the kind of guy to rush a lady."

At that moment, Yvette ran out on the set and yelled, "Trace that call. The man made a terroristic threat on the phone."

"I'm calling from a pay phone, mizz," Bruno said. "Women, I'll be in touch."

And he was. When Sally Sue and I came home (Billy-less because *Viewer* magazine wanted to do a cover story on him) to our respective trailers, we each found a business card slipped under our door. The card read, "Bruno, Elimination Specialist, (609) 555-3201. Confidentiality insured."

"I think he means 'assured,' " Sally Sue said when we met at her place to rehash the show. I didn't dispute her because Sally Sue used to be a proofreader before she took five years off to write a romance novel. When she finished it, Billy was supposed to grow his hair to his shoulders and pose for the cover. Each of us tucked the Bruno card into our wallets.

Watching the video of the *Ricardo Show,* I mean, the *Billy Show,* was traumatic for Sally Sue. She sobbed all during the part where she lassoed the lights, camera, and Ricardo.

"I look like a crazed cowgirl," she wailed.

Although her self-analysis was more on target than her roping, I told her she did fine. She returned the compliment by saying how slender I looked during the seventeen seconds I spent on camera. Over hot-fudge sundaes, we both agreed that Billy, oh that Billy, had roped them all in. We clicked our sticky sundae dishes in a toast to our good taste.

"We found him first," I mumbled as I attacked the whipped cream.

"You don't think Billy will get conceited from all this attention, do you?" Sally Sue asked.

"Never," I said.

"Never," Sally Sue echoed.

Billy called several times during the next week to apologize for not coming home before the *Maurice Show.* What with the spread in *Viewer* magazine and The Billy dance video he was making, his agent, he told us, just didn't think Billy could spare the time.

"Agent?" Sally Sue squealed.

"Yes, agent, hon," Billy replied. "We're really hitting the big time. Now, you girls, I mean, women, just keep to your routines. Sally

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sue, you read the R's in that old phone book, and Ruth Anne, you stay on friendly terms with the parsley and the prunes."

"Yes, Billy," I answered.

"Good. Now I'll meet you in the green room two hours before the taping of the *Maurice Show* next week. Love ya, hons."

"Love ya too, Billy," we chimed.

Grimly, Sally Sue picked up the phone book. More grimly, I started dicing prunes. By the eve of the *Maurice Show,* I had lost four more pounds, and Sally Sue had rasped her way to Rzyardich, Ronald, 212 Pine St., 555-2318.

When Sally Sue and I entered the green room of the *Maurice Show,* we didn't see Billy, only a stylish young woman who looked amazingly like Yvette of the *Ricardo Show.* Actually, she was Yvette.

"Oh, you work on this show too," roared Sally Sue, all those R's making her resonate resoundingly.

"Of course not," she snapped. "I quit my job and now I'm Billy's agent. He's got a great future in this business. I'm just in here waiting for you two."

"Where is Billy?" Sally Sue rumbled.

"Where he can't be disturbed. He likes to meditate before he performs. I'll tell him you're here."

Then she flounced out of the room. Yes, flounced. All my life I had wanted to see a flounce and I instinctively knew that the swish of the hair when in synch with the swish of the clothing is a definite flounce.

"She flounced," I said admiringly.

"Who cares!" Sally Sue bellowed. "She won't let us see Billy."

"No one keeps us from Billy," I said, as I marched boldly down corridors, Sally Sue in tow, scanning nameplates on doors. When I saw an unnamed door sporting a handmade star, I knew we had found our man.

"Open up, Yvette," I yelled. "We know you're holding Billy against his will. He wants to see us."

The thought of Billy as prisoner enraged Sally Sue. After thrusting her right shoulder against the door as they do in movies, she let out a howl of pain as she bounced from the door to the wall. Discreetly, I turned the knob and kicked open the door so that Sally Sue wouldn't think her injury had been in vain.

The "prisoner" cooperated with our attempt at freeing him by unwrapping himself from the embrace of Yvette and croaking, "Hi, hons."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Our names are Ruth Anne and Sally Sue, not hons," I said frostily.

Spotting a box of pastry on the desk, I flounced over and took a jelly doughnut, careful to lick every granule of sugar off my fingers.

"Now, now, hon, I mean Ruth Anne, you're breaking training."

"And you're breaking hearts, Billy. I think the TV viewers should learn of your treachery."

Billy paled, but brightened after Yvette squeezed his bicep and said we wouldn't dare, which, of course, we wouldn't. He was wearing the biker outfit. A close inspection revealed that the decal H-O-N-S had been washed off.

"Don't worry, Billy," she cooed, "I've orchestrated the show so that these two won't be able to say a word."

Oh, that Billy. He tugged at his cowlick and shrugged so boyishly that Sally Sue and I knew immediately he was a victim, just like all those other TV talk-show victims. Yvette must have forced him to change the decals and to embrace her. Poor baby. I threw the second doughnut into the trash and received a thumbs-up sign from Billy for my resolve. Knowing we were back in his camp gave him the strength to sprint onto the set and acknowledge the applause that was much louder for him than for Maurice.

A tall, imposing Frenchman on the order of Charles de Gaulle, Maurice oozed militarism. When he ordered Billy to surrender center stage and take his seat, a mutinous pro-Billy audience hissed its displeasure. Brandishing the mike like a bayonet, Maurice silenced them. Mistakenly, I thought Maurice would triumph over Billy in the battle of the egos, but I underestimated our man. As Maurice spoke to us, reviewing our contests for Billy, our hero sat still, allowing the audience to gaze upon his biker-ness. In the midst of Maurice's recap of our contests, a woman in the audience shouted, "Hey, stud, I just love the studs on your vest."

"They do reflect my studliness, don't they, ma'am?" Billy responded.

The audience howled until Maurice eyed them coldly, as if selecting the worst offenders to be executed on the spot.

"As I was saying," he snapped, "one of your endeavors involved a dart-shooting match in which you, Ruth Anne, were the victor. Am I correct?"

"Yes, sir," I answered smartly.

"And today we're going to reenact that great event."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

At that moment, a dart-board descended from the ceiling on the left side of the set. The audience cheered, Billy grinned, Sally Sue groaned, and I started to sweat. The spectators in the Sudzy Wudzy Tavern, the arena where I had won Billy in darts, numbered five, and four of them had imbided too much sudzy to focus on the game. Now I was to perform in front of the studio audience and the trillions at home.

After Maurice handed me the darts, I stalled for time by casting a critical eye over the absolutely perfect feathers. Another reprieve occurred when Sally Sue dropped a dart on her instep and hobbled off the set. Gallantly, Billy followed her. The audience cheered her as they would an injured athlete, but Maurice glared at her as if Sally Sue were a malingering recruit.

"Since your opponent has defected, Ruth Anne, you must carry on alone," Maurice commanded. "Perform solo!"

Of course, I saluted. It was the proper thing to do. Then, to avoid court-martial, I threw three bull's-eyes in a row. When I turned to acknowledge the roar that had erupted from the audience, I saw Billy doing a wheelie on a motorcycle. Oh, that Billy! He hadn't gone backstage to help Sally Sue; he went there to get the cycle! He upstaged my three bull's-eyes!

"Halt, I say halt," shouted Maurice as Billy *vroomed* into the audience, up and down the aisles, braking occasionally to kiss a young woman or to hoist a thrilled granny onto the seat behind him. When the exhaust from the bike had created a haze over the studio that threatened to eclipse him, Billy leaped from the cycle and did The Billy. The audience went crazy.

And so did Maurice. In one swift move that looked like an uncle-ish pat on the head, he conked Billy with the mike. As Billy slid to the floor, Maurice grabbed him and set him firmly in a chair next to Sally Sue, who had limped back to the set. The audience laughed at Billy's "pretend" daze.

Resuming control, Maurice announced, "We'll take calls from our viewers now."

Two biker "old ladies" called and told Billy they wanted to be his old lady. A woman from Walla Walla wanted to know where to buy The Billy video. When Yvette came on stage to give the answer, Billy came out of his coma. As she flounced offstage, Billy turned to watch her and my heart sank. Decaled on the back of his right ear were the letters Y-V-E-T. It's not that Billy can't spell. It's just that he has small ears.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When Bruno from the Bronx called, it was like hearing from an old friend.

"Yo, Maurice, Bruno from the Bronx here. How ya doing?"

"State your business," ordered Maurice.

"Sure. I got a question for Sally Sue and Ruth Anne. Women, since this guy is not a sensitive, caring, nineties man like me, and he is definitely not meeting your needs, would you like me to off him?"

Maurice beamed. "Why, that's an interesting idea, Bruno."

"Maurice, I ain't talking to you."

"Oh, sorry."

I glanced at Sally Sue, who looked wistful. During a break for a commercial, she whispered to me that she too had seen the letters behind Billy's ear. But we both thanked Bruno and said no after Billy, that master of timing, had blown us each a kiss.

Only the wrap-up remained, and to perform that sacred duty, Maurice turned to Dr. Carla Young, psychologist, who oozed self-confidence.

"It's quite obvious to all but the certified dull that what we have here is a case of the exhibitionist, Billy, strutting his stuff for the voyeurs, Sally Sue and Ruth Anne. It's not that they love Billy per se. It's just that they love peeking at him and these so-called contests are merely transactions to determine who gets the next peek."

For the first time in her TV career, Dr. Young was soundly booed. She twirled her hair and bit her thumbnail as she staggered off-stage. For once I was grateful to Billy's fans, who truly believed that we loved him.

After the show, Billy had no time to talk to us. A photographer from *Motorcycle Mania* magazine had posed him on the Billycycle, the name on the back of the bike. Oh, that Yvette! She must have been really busy buying glittery gold decals for bikes and ears, and setting up photo opportunities, and nudging out Sally Sue and me for Billy's affections. All those activities must have seriously cut into her flouncing time.

As soon as we got back to my place, I kicked off my shoes and curled up in Billy's old recliner. Somehow I knew that chair was as close as I'd get to Billy from then on, but I was too tired to care. Before long I fell asleep and had an insightful dream. In it, Sally Sue and I were standing next to a table in a laboratory. When lightning flashed through the windows, I saw a man asleep on the table. Sally Sue and I put on white coats and then attached jumper

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cables to his temples. We pulled some switches and electricity zigzagged through the man. The shocks woke him up and he ripped off the straps that bound him to the table. "Hi, hons," he said before he started destroying the room.

Startled, I woke up and called out to Sally Sue, who had come home with me, supposedly to make more sundaes. Actually, she had come to my place for another reason which I soon found out.

"Sally Sue, I need to talk to you," I yelled again.

"Be right there. I'm on the phone."

The sound of Sally Sue talking in her normal voice helped me shake off the scariness of the dream. When she came into the living room, I knew what I had to tell her.

"Sally Sue, I've had a dream and it explains everything. Brace yourself: my dream tells me that we've created Billystein, a monster."

"I know." She grinned. "That's what I just told Bruno and he agreed that Billy is our Frankenstein."

"Bruno?"

"Yes, Bruno from the Bronx. I just spoke to him. I lost his business card and came here to use the one he sent you. Bruno's going to carry out the plan I thought of, but we have to do our part."

"Do our part?" I croaked.

"Yes, and on the *Zazu Show*. It will be a talk-show first."

This couldn't be happening. I was locked in the dream laboratory. To prove it, I yanked at my hair. It hurt. I was awake and that person in front of me, talking with all the assurance of a TV therapist, was my former archrival, Sally Sue. When she told me the plan, I said I wanted nothing to do with it, but the package Billy had delivered to my door changed my mind.

The note in the box read: "Hons, don't forget the training program. Sally Sue, take a bite out of the Big Apple by practicing your speech lessons on the Manhattan phone book. Ruth Anne, here's some New York City inorganically grown parsley for you to sprinkle on your prunes. Don't bother calling to thank me, I'm tied up with my agent. Love, Billy."

After receiving Billy's package, the only time I wavered about carrying out the plan was when we entered the green room for the *Zazu Show*. She was a non-bottom pinching, environmentally correct grandmother who had stocked the green room with refreshments (in recyclable containers, of course) for us. Such thoughtfulness made me want to ditch the plan until Billy flounced into the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

green room. Yes, flounced. The jacket of his burlap coat swished at the exact moment that his cowlick bobbed and his reusable-container shoes squeaked. I'd call that a three-ring flounce.

"Hons," he began.

"Our names are not hons," Sally Sue and I retorted.

"Oh, okay. Well, Sally Sue and Ruth Anne, just don't use too much airtime bowling over me."

"Bowling?" I asked.

"Yep. They're setting up a miniature bowling lane on the set so you girls—"

"Women," corrected Sally Sue.

"So you girls can do it all over again like the night Sally Sue won me at Bowla-Bowla. But hurry it up. Yvette figures a minute and a half ought to do it. That will give me the camera time I need now that I'm a celebrity."

Executing a reverse flounce, he left the room. Oh, that Billy! As the romance novels like to say, he had just sealed his fate.

After Zazu introduced us, Sally Sue nudged me and pointed to the audience. Although we knew him only from a blurry photo he had sent, I recognized at once the person Sally Sue had singled out. In the spirit of Sally Sue's plan, Bruno from the Bronx had dressed in a military-looking khaki outfit set off by a jaunty brown beret. He looked like a young Saddam Hussein. I squirmed. There was still time to call off the plan. I could fake a faint, perhaps another talk-show first, but Sally Sue, sensing my distress, whispered, "Courage."

Veering from the standard talk-show format, Zazu let the TV therapist, Dr. Sharon Thorney, open the show because, Zazu said, "The whole world knows about Billy, Sally Sue, and Ruth Anne now. So what's your opinion, Doctor?"

Flipping her long blond hair away from her right eye, Dr. Thorney pronounced us certifiable. "A deep psychosis is at work here. Obviously all three have multiple personalities that manifest themselves in each other. Obviously, Billy is really Sally Sue and Ruth Anne. Clearly, Sally Sue is really Billy and Ruth Anne. Definitely, Ruth Anne is really Billy and Sally Sue."

Before Dr. Thorney could continue, Zazu jumped in and thanked her drily for "acquainting us with the disorder of the week." Dr. Thorney pulled her feet up under her and curled up into a tight little ball.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"So let the game begin," said Zazu as two stagehands carried out the portable bowling lane.

Sally Sue and I bowled four strikes in a row. We were having such a good time that I forgot about the plan until Billy's antics made me remember it. As Sally Sue and I were talcing our fingers for the fifth frame, Billy, jealous of the audience's attention to us, sprinted in front of the lane.

"Hey, you environmentally correct audience, let me tell you about my outfit. The suit's been recycled from potato sacks, the shoes from fast-food orders, and . . ."

"Sit down, Billy," hollered a sweet-looking young woman. "I'm getting a bowling lesson watching Sally Sue and Ruth Anne."

To win her over, Billy grinned and tugged at his cowlick, his trademark "aw shucks" gesture that shot Bruno from the Bronx right out of his seat. Bruno was wearing an "I'm a sensitive, caring assassin" look and was panting for action, but it was too soon. Sally Sue signaled him to wait. She wanted the plan to go into effect when everyone was absorbed in the show. Billy soon obliged us by performing a real attention-grabber.

"Miss, I appreciate your wanting to take a bowling lesson," Billy said sweetly, "but how about you taking a recycling lesson from me? How about I show you my recycled skivvies, made out of plastic shopping bags from the Outrageous Undies shop?"

The audience whistled and cheered. The young woman yelled, "Sit down, Sally Sue and Ruth Anne. We want Billy."

To the chant of "We want Billy," the monster began to undress, doing a crude version of a striptease and handing discarded pieces of clothing to Yvette, who had come onto the set. At precisely the moment when Billy started to unbuckle his belt, Sally Sue nodded at Bruno from the Bronx. Shots rang out, the set went dark, the audience stampeded up the aisles, Yvette screamed, Zazu gasped, Sally Sue laughed, and I giggled. Oh, that Billy! We were free of him at last.

When the backup lights went on, Yvette became completely unflounced. Weakly, she pointed to Billy's chair.

"He's gone," she sobbed. "Someone shot out the lights so he could kidnap Billy in the dark."

"But hark, there's a note pinned to Billy's chair," said Sally Sue, a bit dramatically, I thought.

"Let's not overdo it, Sally Sue," I cautioned. "No more harking. Let someone else read the note."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Okay." She grinned.

It was only right that Zazu should read the note (composed by Sally Sue); after all, it was her show until Billy took over. In solemn tones she read:

> On behalf of all the sensitive, caring, nineties men, I, Bruno from the Bronx, leader of legions of men like myself, have kidnapped Billy the Oaf, who is a Neanderthalian affront to womanhood and manhood. Although a tribunal of sensitive, caring, nineties men has pronounced Billy beyond redemption, we will release him tomorrow after he agrees never to appear on any talk shows, magazine covers, or videos. If the oaf breaks the agreement, he will be shot on sight by any duly authorized sensitive, caring, nineties man, of which there are legions. There is a price of one million dollars on Billy's head if he ever shows that head in the media again.
>
> Bruno from the Bronx

A sensitive, caring New York cabdriver who recognized Billy from a newspaper photo picked him up the next morning on 38th Street and drove him to the TV studio to reclaim his clothes. On the way, Billy spotted Yvette entering an unemployment office. Shirtless and shivering, he jumped out of the cab and caught up with her.

"Hon, hon," he panted, "I'm back from my terrible ordeal. We can be together again."

"Buzz off, Billy," Yvette said as she pushed him from her. "You're unmarketable. Nobody wants to hire somebody with a price on his head. I'm collecting unemployment till I find another client. Now get away from me. I don't want to be hit by a stray bullet. There's a TV camera across the street filming this. Already you're breaking your contract with Bruno from the Bronx."

The evening news showed Billy dashing to the cab and diving onto the floor. The camera also caught Yvette in a magnificent flounce. Security guards, fearful that Billy's presence in a TV studio might draw sniper fire, refused him entrance, but did drop his shirt, tie, and jacket down five floors to him.

Back home, Sally Sue and I toasted each other as we waited for the inevitable collect phone call.

"Hons, I love you both," he began. "I thought of the two of you and the good times we've had as I sat chained to a lawn chair in the basement of a house in Beirut."

"The Bronx, Billy," I corrected.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It might as well have been Beirut," he pouted. "I rode for miles stuffed in a car trunk and you know how bad that is for my sciatica."

"Poor baby," chuckled Sally Sue, who had picked up the call on the portable phone. "And when you got to the basement, were you tortured?"

"Was I! A madman wearing a beret and Groucho glasses and moustache slammed a Manhattan telephone directory on my lap and made me read it out loud for hours. He wouldn't feed me till I got to the D's."

"So what did he bring you?" I asked.

"A meal not fit for a human being. Diced prunes and parsley! I was so desperate I signed the agreement."

Oh, that Bruno! He followed our instructions to the letter. Sally Sue and I slapped hands in a gleeful high five.

"So, hons, I want to come home," he whined. "And I'll divide my time evenly between you."

"Sorry, Billy, but I'll be too busy. I'm turning my romance novel into a thriller," said Sally Sue.

"I'm sorry too, Billy," I said. "I'm going back to school."

"But hons," he wailed.

"Can't talk any longer, Billy," I said. "Someone's on Call Waiting. Since Bruno from the Bronx gave our numbers to legions of sensitive, caring, nineties guys, the phone's been ringing night and day. *Ciao.*"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Men who choose to develop a female sleuth as a central series character are still relatively rare in our field. William Beechcroft is trying it for the first time in the following story, which introduces police detective "Kat" Curtci in a homicide case that may make or break her . . .

FLOATER

by WILLIAM BEECHCROFT

When he caught sight of the object in the canal behind his house, Sam Wolff thought it was a manatee, not an uncommon visitor this time of year on their Southwest Florida barrier island.

"I don't think so, Sammy," Myra Wolff said, her butterless melba toast arrested halfway to her mouth. "It's not moving."

They had been enjoying breakfast in the cool of early morning on the canal-side upper deck of their piling house. Now their attention was on the large gray object nudging their dock down in the canal.

"Tide's coming in," Sam observed. "It's a dead manatee, drifted in from the bay."

He set down his coffee mug, pushed back from the glass-topped table, and walked down the rear steps to the sparse lawn.

Out on the dock, he felt as if he'd been hit with a jolt of electric current. He stared down at a human body, face down, dressed in gray slacks and long-sleeved shirt, its left shoulder gently bumping the corner dock piling.

"What is it, Sam?" Myra called from up on the deck.

"Don't come down, honeybun. It's a floater."

He was surprised at his word choice. Too much TV. "A body, Myra. Some unfortunate fellow drowned."

"Omigod!" Myra shrieked. "Should I call Nine-One-One?"

"Oh, yes indeed," Sam shouted back. "But use the regular police number. It's not an emergency now."

Thirteen minutes later, he had a yardful of people.

* * *

© 1995 by William Beechcroft.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

First to appear was Katherine "Kat" Curtci, promoted to detective just a week ago. She had lucked out on this one. Assigned the undignified task of checking out a weenie-wagger report at the lighthouse end of Malabar Island, she had been muttering to herself that this was a uniformed cop's job when the radio erupted.

The island's thirty-person police department was normally concerned with toad-in-the-toilet and bare-bosoms-on-the-beach complaints. A response to an I-found-a-body call was a detective's plum. When it came, Kat Curtci was only a quarter-mile from the Wolffs' palm-shaded gray piling house.

Out back in the canal was a body, all right. Kat stripped off her shoes, hiked up her skirt, and worked her way among the mangroves down the sandy bank to the right of the dock. She waded the ten feet out to the corpse. The high-tide water was warm as blood this overcast August day, but she shuddered as the ook on the canal bottom squeezed up through the mesh of her pantyhose. The stench was impressive, but she knew that three minutes of bad odors numbs the olfactory nerves. She could hack it for those three minutes, then the Wolffs would be admiring the macho lady cop.

Largely for Sam Wolff's benefit up on the dock where he gagged into the handkerchief he'd clamped over his nose, she probed for a pulse. The body's neck felt like clammy chicken skin. Beneath its thick water-soaked black hair, the back of the skull appeared to have been battered inward. She checked the hip pockets of the work pants for a wallet. Nothing.

Scavengers had already worked on the ears and fingertips. All she could determine at this point was that the body was male, black hair moderately long, and he was dressed in a gray work shirt and trousers. Reaching underwater around the hips, she forced her fingers into the front pockets. She felt a round, hard object in the left one. A ring. She held it against the overcast sky. Thin gold with a lilac-colored square-cut stone. About two carats of amethyst, she guessed. What a peculiar item to be the only find in a dead man's pockets.

With the ring clenched in one hand, Kat stood, her five feet ten elevating her chin to dock level.

"You said you spotted him just a few minutes ago, Mr. Wolff?"

"Yep. Myra and I had just started breakfast when I—"

The howl of multiple sirens drowned out the rest of what he said. The sirens cut off abruptly, doors slammed, and here came at least a third of the Malabar PD, all crowding onto the dock until there

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was no room for its owner. The scene of the crime had become police property.

"Come up out of there, Bela. This one is mine."

Kat glared up into the doughy face of Detective Ellis Duckworth. Wouldn't you know, she thought, that he'd be the detective assigned. No love had been lost between them. When Duckworth had heard about her Transylvanian heritage, he'd chortled, "Don't go on night patrol with Bela LuCurtci." She had surveyed his ballooning waistline and said brightly, "Thar she blows!" Thereafter he was known to the whole department as Moby Duck.

"I thought you were all tied up in the rash of burglaries we've been having." She stepped back from the body and waded toward shore.

"This obviously takes precedence," Duckworth said in the tone that he usually reserved for ignorant civilians.

She climbed back up the canal bank, pulled her shoes on wet feet, and noted with distaste that her skirt was water-soaked to the waist.

"The policeman's lot is not a happy one," Detective Duckworth chortled. He thumbed back the brim of his straw planter's hat. "Cole Porter, I think."

"Gilbert and Sullivan," she grumped, looking back at the corpse in the canal.

"Whatever. How deep is it down there?"

"No need to get your toes tainted, Moby. Male Cauc, about thirty-five—"

"Drowned."

"Nothing in his pockets except—"

"Robbed, then drowned . . . except what?"

She handed him the ring. He shrugged and shoved it in his pocket.

"Back of the skull shows massive damage—" she managed to get out before Moby butted in again.

"Hit over the head, robbed, then drowned—"

"For God's sake, Duckworth, stop hopping to conclusions and *listen* to me!"

Sunk in fatty folds, his little eyes glittered. "Got to ya, didn't I? Go on back to your unit and put in a call for the county M.E."

"You put in the call, Moby. You already said it's your case."

"C'mon, let's have a little teamwork."

"Yes," she agreed eagerly. "Let's. I want to work on it with you."

He snorted. "In a year, maybe. When you know something. I don't need—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Time of death? Two or three days ago."

He fanned himself with his wide-brimmed hat, exposing a lot of bald skull. Then his bright little eyes almost disappeared in a squint. "Based on what?"

"A body sinks till internal gases form. It's summer here in the subtropics, and gas forms in two to three days. Up comes the body."

"Could have been floating for a couple of days after it came up."

"Unobserved in a canal or out in the bay? Come on, Moby. It would have been spotted long before now by the daily geezer fishing armada. Huh uh, he came up last night and the tide drifted him in here."

"Call the M.E.," Duckworth growled, and he turned his back. Hadn't listened to a word she'd said, Kat thought. Then as she trotted toward the driveway, she noticed he was furiously scrawling in his pocket notebook. Maybe he had listened.

When she returned to dockside a few minutes later, Duckworth had begun to clear the area of extraneous police uniforms. He talked the chalk-faced Wolffs back up to their rear deck then turned to Kat.

"You, uh, might as well stick around, see what the M.E. has to say." That was offered in such an offhand way that she half expected him to dig a self-conscious toe in the lawn and give her an aw shucks shrug. Instead, he glared at her, his wide mouth compressed to a razor slash. A body language "Well?"

"Thanks," she said. "I will."

Cal Hewlett, the county medical examiner, looked up from the body that he had rolled over then back again to its original facedown position. Kat had noted that the wiry little M.E. with feathers of white hair curling from under his Orioles baseball cap had spent most of his time fingering the head wound.

"Typical floater," he announced. "Best guess, he's been dead two days, three at the most. More likely three, considering the condition of the nails. 'Bout to fall off. No ID on him."

Duckworth gazed down from the dock. "Any chance of prints?"

"Nope. Scavengers have seen to that." Hewlett stripped off his latex gloves and dropped them in a plastic bag. He pulled off his cap and ran his fingers through unruly white hair. "Mighty peculiar, that ding on the back of his skull."

"How so?"

"The lacerations, Moby."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On the dock near Duckworth, Kat suppressed a grin. The nickname had spread to the M.E.'s office.

"Thought it was a blunt-instrument job."

"I think it is, with an added attraction. Under all that hair, he's full of little cuts."

"Cuts?" Duckworth stepped to the edge of the dock and peered down.

Hewlett slapped his baseball cap back in place and pulled its long bill low over his eyes. " 'Nuff said for the moment. Fax you my report tomorrow morning, latest."

At his rubber-topped steel desk in Malabar police headquarters, Duckworth scowled at the fax that had just rolled out of the department's Murata. Nursing her Styrofoam cup of dense coffee at the desk in front of his, Kat had swung her chair around.

"Well?" she prompted.

"Weird," Duckworth offered. He handed her the three-page fax. "You make anything out of that?"

Death, she read, *resulted from massive cranial trauma caused by two nonpenetrating and sixteen penetrating wounds.*

What in the world?

The M.E. had shaved the back of the head and found two parallel nonpenetrating injuries, four and a half inches apart and three inches long. Each was depressed into the skull a quarter of an inch.

Between them were four rows of incisions, four per row, each incision penetrating the skull three-eighths of one inch. The incisions were at approximate one-inch intervals in one direction, one-half inch intervals in the other, all within a four-inch by two-inch rectangular pattern.

"Uh huh, Bela. What do you make of that?"

"I can't even begin to guess."

He nodded. "Thought so."

"And you?"

"Same. Look, I'm going over to the mainland to check possible missing persons reports. You . . . do whatever you can here."

"Do I gather that I'm working with you on this thing?"

" 'Fraid so. Not my idea. Chief McCready says it'll get you some experience." He raised a forefinger. "But I'm not nursemaiding, y'understand. You fiddle around on your own."

Oh, nicely put, Moby. "Yeah," she said through clenched teeth, "I'll do some fiddling."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

Funny. Kat had felt sublimely confident when she was verbally jousting with Moby Duck. But now that he had, in effect, put her on her own without him here to riposte her wit, she felt as if she were about to fall facedown in the sand. She had completed an exhausting house-to-house on both sides of the canal. Half the homes were owned by winter residents and currently stood empty. The seven year-rounders whom she'd caught at home stated they had neither seen nor heard anything useful.

The sky had cleared. Now the South Florida sun beat down mercilessly. She walked from the last occupied house to her car. Dead end. Except for the peculiar configuration of the fatal wound. What could possibly inflict that geometrically perfect square of sixteen little stabs? Some New Age meat tenderizer mallet? The only such mallet she was familiar with had blunt knobs on its striking face.

She buckled her seat belt, turned the key, flipped the A/C to MAX, and backed the Plymouth out of the sand-and-shell drive. Could the odd pattern have been carefully inflicted by a crazy perp with . . . with maybe an X-Acto knife or a scalpel? Were they dealing with a nutso model builder? A mad doctor?

But what about the two long parallel dents on either side of the square of stab wounds? They sure put a damper on any specialized-mallet theory.

Back at MPD headquarters she pulled in just as Moby Duck was dismounting his own unmarked unit. "Anything?" she called across the roof of the car between them.

"Only missing persons listed with the county sheriff are kids. You got anything?"

"Nope. Half the homeowners are north. The other half neither saw nor heard any evil."

"Not surprised," he said as they walked across the parking area. "Canal's too shallow for a body to be in it for long without somebody spotting it. Had to drift in last night, and the Wolffs saw it as soon as they went out on their rear deck."

"We should check the tide tables," Kat suggested.

"Done it. High tide was at seven-forty A.M., just about when the Wolffs spotted the body. My guess is that it came up just as the outgoing tide was turning and drifted on in."

"Couldn't have started from very far away, could it?"

Duckworth grinned. "Checked on that, too. Over at the Coast Guard station on the mainland. If he was dropped on the other side

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the bay or any real distance from this island, he would have been spotted easily between there and here when he came up. Their best guess is that he was dumped in on this side of the bay, somewhere between the canal and Lighthouse Point. I took a look over there. Couple of docks go out right far into the bay, and most of the houses are empty this time of year. My best guess is that he was dumped from one of them docks, say on Wednesday." He grinned. "So what have you come up with?"

"Zilch." She hated to admit it, but so far, Moby Duck had done all the sleuthing.

They climbed the steps to the PD offices. He held the door for her, but she couldn't help feeling that even that little courtesy was a backhanded way of showing her he was the prime mover on this case.

The coffee machine produced its quarter's worth of bitter brew. She sipped the stuff absently, staring through the adjacent window at the raggedy Sabal palms that fringed the little lake out back.

Okay, so he was the prime mover, but now that she really thought about it, what had he moved? The only new data was a best guess that the victim was dumped in the bay off one of the docks between the canal and Lighthouse Point. That wasn't a whole lot of help, was it? They'd have been better off if—

"Hey, Bela," Duckworth called, "quit daydreaming and do something constructive. Way this thing stands now, Chief McCready'll have us both on the carpet if we don't produce something useful pretty quick."

She spun around. "Speak for yourself, Moby. What you've got isn't any . . ." Her voice trailed off. What he'd said had just twanged a subconscious memory. She made a lunge for the Yellow Pages directory in her desk drawer.

At nine the next morning she drove across the causeway without telling Moby anything. He was still hung up on tidal currents and wasn't in a receptive mood anyway. Let him find his own leads.

All three establishments she had jotted down were on the mainland, normally out of her jurisdiction, but not in the investigation of a murder that had taken place on Malabar Island. The first was a gray cinderblock building in a weedy corner of a failed industrial park along the Tamiami Trail. McNAIR CARPET LAYERS, read a florid red and yellow sign over the entrance.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She pulled open the squeaky plywood door and stepped straight into what looked like a supply room, semi-deserted, with a desk in one corner adjacent to a restroom door. Nobody home?

"Yo!" she shouted. "Anyone here?"

A toilet flushed, and shortly a chunky man with thin sandy hair and a really terrific sunburn emerged from the restroom drying his hands on a paper towel.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Damn boat broke down last weekend. I was out in the sun for hours before anybody came by. I think I've got radiation poisoning, for Chris' sake." He chucked the wadded towel toward a wastebasket beside the desk and focused on her. "What can I do for you?"

"Detective Curtci, Malabar Police. Mr. McNair?"

"The same." He seemed to have taken on a sudden guardedness.

"First I'd like to take a look at one of those things rug layers use. Pad on one end, kind of a gripper thing at the other."

"A knee kicker. Sure, got one back here behind the desk."

He bumbled around back there, then emerged with a device about eighteen inches long, telescoping steel tubes with a padded square at right angles on one end. He handed it to her and she studied the other end. Bingo! Four rows of four half-inch steel spines in a steel rectangle. Just as she'd remembered from the carpeting job she'd had done in her condo three years ago. The carpet layer had slapped the spines into the carpeting near its edge then whammed the pad with his knee. The sliding block of prongs stretched the carpet into place. She'd bet that Moby Duck had never seen one of these. His little bayside house had tile floors.

She hefted the knee kicker. Yes, it would make an efficient if clumsy murder weapon. She handed it back to McNair.

"How many companies are there in this area that use these things?"

McNair scratched a shoulder and winced. "There's a whole lot of carpet companies, but none of them has in-house layers. They all subcontract to one of us."

Kat pulled a notebook out of her black leather handbag and flipped it open. With her ballpoint poised, she said, "I found Yellow Pages listings for just three carpet installers. There are only three?"

"That's right. There's me, there's A-One Carpets over on Gulf Road, and there's Redhen Layers up on Riveredge Street."

"Redhen Layers? You've got to be kidding."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's for real. Named after the owner, Gustave Redhen. Play on words gets him remembered, but it's the quality of work that counts."

"How's a carpet-laying job handled?"

"Teams of two. It's real specialized work. I'm lucky to have three teams on the payroll."

"Have you had any contracts over on Malabar Island in the past week?"

"Huh uh. Wish I had."

"None of the teams was assigned over there?"

"I told you, no."

She slipped the pen in the notebook's spirals and put both back in her purse. "I thank you, Mr. McNair. You've been a help."

He squinted up at her. "What's all this about, anyway?"

"Just routine," she said with a hint of a smile. She loved delivering that vapid Hollywood exit line.

A-One Carpets was in a more congested part of town, sandwiched between Kentucky Fried Chicken and Shoney's. The little clapboard one-story building was painted a wretched flamingo pink with sea-green trim. She parked in one of the empty spaces out front, not difficult because all four spaces were empty. The day's heat had reached the simmer level as she read the typed notice stuck on the aluminum entrance door with masking tape: *Closed for vacation, August 15–31.*

That took care of A-One Carpets, unless one of the company's teams was freelancing. She'd try to check into that if Redhen Layers—Lord, what a name—didn't, uh, hatch out. C'mon, Kat, get real!

The place reeked of cigarette smoke. Gustave Redhen looked a lot like . . . Well, he was as tall as she, had a cockscomb of rust-colored hair, a scrawny neck, and he carried his beak-nosed head thrust forward with a king-sized smoke stuck in the corner of his small mouth.

"What possible interest can the Malabar police have in my little operation?" His voice was high and scratchy. The cigarette bounced as he spoke.

"Maybe none, Mr. Redhen." Hard to say the name and keep a straight face. "How many teams of carpet layers do you employ?"

"Three. Wish I had more. Good layers are hard to find."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She glanced around the office. Walnut-framed eight-by-ten glossies adorned the stark white walls, photos of Redhen shaking hands with satisfied clients, she presumed. She recognized one of them as a former senator. Another was the current mayor.

"You seem to have an illustrious clientele."

"I do all right." His beady little eyes stayed right on hers. "You're not here on carpet business."

"In a way, I am. Have your people done any work on Malabar Island in the past week, Mr. Redhen?"

"One job, four days ago, big one. On Strangler Fig Road, for the retired head of OT & T. Had to send a helper along with them to carry the carpeting in. More than three thousand feet of it."

"I'd appreciate the customer's name, Mr. Redhen."

He walked to a green steel desk, riffled through a box of file cards, and handed one to her.

"May I use your phone?"

"Sure. Right there on the desk."

Beside the phone was a coffee-can lid brimming over with stained butts. She pushed it to the farthest corner of the littered desk and dialed the number he'd given her.

"Mrs. Oliphant? This is Detective Katherine Curtci, Malabar Police."

"Yes, Detective?" Mrs. Oliphant's contralto voice was that of a woman not at all intimidated by a call from the police.

"I understand that you had new carpeting laid several days ago."

"Yes, last Wednesday."

"By a crew of three men?"

"There were three when they started. I went out for several hours, and when I returned, there were only two. They told me the third man had come along only to help them move the furniture and carry the new carpeting in and the old carpeting out. He wasn't needed to help with the actual installation."

"You left the crew in the house by themselves, Mrs. Oliphant?"

"Well, I hadn't planned to, but an emergency came up. My daughter lives here on the island, and her son had fallen and severely cut himself. I babysat her youngest while she took the boy to the doctor."

"And when you returned to your house, there were only two carpet men?"

"Yes, as I've already told you."

So she had. Kat thanked her and hung up with her thought process in overdrive.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Where is the crew that did the Oliphant work?" she asked Redhen.

"Back on the island. Woody and Tiny." The cigarette joggled in his mouth. He squinted against its eye-searing smoke tendrils. "They're installing carpet in an unfurnished spec house. Four thirty-six Paperbark Lane."

"They'll be there now?"

Redhen shrugged. "Should be. It's an all-day job."

She got out of that choking atmosphere and in the parking area took her first deep breath since she'd gone in.

The house was another piling structure. She climbed the stairs and opened the door without knocking. The gray-painted, rough-cut wood exterior belied the sumptuous interior. She could see the money, though the place was empty of furniture. Across the gymnasium-sized great room, two men banged away at their knee kickers to secure rich gold carpeting along the sliding-door access to a huge deck beyond.

"Woody and Tiny?"

On their knees, they both whirled around at the sound of her voice.

"Detective Curtci, Malabar Police."

They crouched motionless.

"Which one of you is Woody?"

"That'll be me." The man on the left stood clumsily, no doubt having been on his knees most of the day. "Ed Woodworth." He was a skinny whip of a fellow. In his late thirties, she judged. Dark hair beginning to thin. A face as narrow as Fred Astaire's had been.

"And you must be Tiny." The other rug mechanic was only fifty pounds shy of Sumo requirements, she thought as he struggled to his feet.

"Yeah, that's me," he rumbled through his dense beard. "Charles Birch. What's the beef?"

Kat walked to the counter that divided the open kitchen area from the rest of the room and placed her open handbag in easy reach. Her seventeen-shot, 9mm Glock was the top item in there. She leaned against the counter with her right hand resting lightly on the handbag.

"Well, gentlemen, maybe you can clear up something that's bugging me. On the Oliphant job. I'm told there were three of you at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the start and just two at the finish. What happened to the third man?"

She caught their furtive glances at each other. Paydirt!

"He cut out around noon," Woody said. "When we broke for lunch. Asked him would he want to go to the Beachwalk Cafe with us, he said no, and when we came back maybe thirty, forty minutes later, he was gone."

Through that, Woody's eyes were all over the room, and his blink rate quadrupled. Throw in his bouncing Adam's apple, she thought, and you've got yourself a liar here.

"Does that square with your version?" she asked Tiny.

"Huh? What ver— Oh yeah. Sure does."

"What was the man's name?"

"Ganelli," Woody offered, "or Gianelli . . . something like that."

"You didn't know him?"

"He came from one of those labor pool places. We picked him up in town. No, we didn't know him. He was a temp. Lotta them are drifters. They come and go."

Kat let that simmer for a long silent moment. Then she said, "If the three of you came in the truck I saw parked outside, and this Gianelli disappeared around noon, how did he get back to the mainland?"

Another silence. Then Woody said, "Hitched a ride, maybe?"

It came out as a question. These two were simply atrocious liars. She gave them another long, silent stare. It produced a lot of shifting footwork and throat clearings on the other side of the room.

Then she offered what she hoped came off as a warm and friendly grin. "Oh, come on, you two, you just aren't very good at the cover-up game. What *really* happened that day at the Oliphants' house?"

Woody stared at her like a man about to bolt. Tiny hunched his hairy face down between his huge shoulders like a man about to charge. Kat's fingers slid down for a reassuring touch of the chubby Glock.

"This Gianelli," she said, "was he a white man, medium build, black hair?"

"That's about right." Woody's voice sounded as if he were strangling.

"He floated into a canal yesterday. With a bash in the head that looks exactly like the working face of those knee kickers there. When I take them in for testing, I wouldn't be surprised to find traces of blood on one of them."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tiny's glittery little eyes held hers for a long moment, then he astounded her. His huge legs gave way and he sank to the floor with a moan, his hands thrust out palms-up in a really weird supplicating gesture.

"Jeez, Woody, I tol' you—"

"A nightmare," Woody blurted. "That's what it was. Still is."

Kat's heart pumped furiously. "What happened?"

"Gianelli was a goddamn thief," Woody burst out. "That's what happened. Som' bitch took labor jobs to case houses, or if he could, swipe stuff while he was on a legit job. That's what he did there soon's the old lady left."

"That's the God's truth," Tiny boomed. "I caught him about to lift stuff in the bedroom. Outta a jewelry box half an hour after the missus left."

"Then?" Kat prompted.

"Then," Woody said with a little shudder, "he pulled a gun on us. Said to back off and let him get out of there with what he'd grabbed, or he'd plug us both. I kid you not, it was a real bad situation. Him in the bedroom with a gun on Tiny. Me in the great room with only a knee kicker in my hand. So I—"

Kat shot out her arm, hand up in a stop signal. "Hold it right there. We're going to make this nice and clean. 'You have the right to remain silent . . .' " She recited the Miranda warning.

"Hell with that!" Woody's eyes were huge in his narrow face. "I gotta get this off my chest, now I've gone this far. I never felt so bad in my whole life like I did these past coupla days." He swallowed hard. "It was like this, see? Tiny backs out of the bedroom into the great room. Alla time, Gianelli—or whatever his name was—has a damned huge forty-five on him. So when Tiny backs through the door and spots me, he starts talkin' to the guy. To keep his attention, you know? Then when the guy comes through the door, I'm flat against the wall. As soon as he's all the way in, I rap him with the knee kicker."

"Some rap," Kat said. "You stove in the back of his skull."

"That made us both sick, sick and scared. We panicked. Rolled him in a piece of the old carpet and stowed him in the truck until quittin' time. Then we drove out to the east end of the island and waited till it got dark."

"Sure takes a long time to get dark," Tiny said.

Woody shot him an impatient look. "When it did, we carried him out on one of the docks and dropped him in. Figured the tide'd carry him out into the Gulf."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"And the gun?" Kat asked.

"Threw that in, too. A diver could find it."

"What you didn't know," she said, "is that a body first sinks, then comes back up a few days later. You're both under arrest," she said conversationally.

Woody's voice was suddenly scratchy. "For murder?"

"For various," she said. "Sit down, both of you. I've got to cuff you. Regulations." She fished in her handbag. She had only one pair, so she cuffed Woody's skinny wrist to Tiny's huge one. Neither one, to her immense relief, showed the slightest sign of resistance.

Then, on impulse, she nodded toward the phone on the divider. "Is that hooked up?"

"Guess so," Woody said. "Realtor sits in here on weekends."

She couldn't resist. When Moby Duck answered his phone in the squad room, she said sweetly, "Any progress?"

"Damn right!" he boomed. "Got an assist lined up from the FBI to help us figure out the wound pattern. That's a big step forward. So what have you done?"

"Oh, found out what the murder weapon was, though I think this case could end up being a matter of self-defense."

"Jeez, what was the weapon?"

She ignored him. "Also determined who the victim was—and he just might have been the series burglar you've been beating your brains out to find."

"Wha— Who—"

"And I know who did him in. There are two of them."

Silence, then, "Come on, woman, *give!*" Duckworth bellowed.

"Read them the Miranda, and I have them shackled here with me."

"Where?" Duckworth sounded as if he were strangling. *"How?"* Another silence. Then he said, much quieter, "You kidding me, Detective?"

"Would I ever kid you, Moby?"

His voice sounded as if he'd just been hit in the gut as he asked, "Do you need backup?"

She gave him a silvery chuckle. "That could be helpful, Detective Duckworth. We're at Four thirty-six Paperbark, and we'll wait." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When it comes to creating an authentic atmosphere for the historical mystery Clayton Emery ranks with the best in the genre. He shares with writers like Britain's Paul Doherty a lack of squeamishness in portraying the grislier side of medieval life, with all its sights, sounds, and smells. In this new adventure of Robin Hood, the outlaw and the ever-astute Marian have got to solve a traditional whodunit . . .

GRINDING THE GHOST

by CLAYTON EMERY

"Unclean! 'Ware! 'Ware the leper!"

Robin and Marian needed no more warning. They backed down the narrow road to a trough where an ash had toppled, slid under it amidst brush. Robin drew a cross in the dirt with his right toe. "Hie then! Get yourself by and gone!"

Husband and wife watched the pathetic figure straggle past. Clad in a hooded robe gray with filth, the leper hobbled on crippled feet. A tin bell atop his tall staff clanked mournfully. "Unclean! Unclean! 'Ware the leper!"

Shuffle, shuffle, the unseen feet plodded through new-fallen leaves of oak and ash and beech and elm. Robin and Marian waited until the pariah was out of sight, then took to the road again.

"There but for the grace of God," Robin breathed. "They should be cast away from decent folk altogether."

Marian tsked. "I don't abide the notion sick people have sinned, you know. It doesn't take the wrath of God to unbalance your humours."

"Only God could curse you with leprosy." Robin swung his bow as they walked. He kept an arrow crooked alongside in case they flushed game. "It's the worst fate there is. You're neither alive nor dead, wandering like a ghost, yet shackled with worldly woes."

"I know that." Marian was dressed like her husband, in a tattered shirt and trousers of green—they had yet to switch to winter

© 1995 by Clayton Emery.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

brown—with a laced deerskin tunic and tall greased boots. A soft hat with a jaunty pheasant feather spilled over her dark hair. Both carried bows and quivers, a knife, a satchel of provisions. "I've seen many at the leprosarium in the caves under Nottingham Castle. For their suffering, they should be pitied."

"I'll pity 'em. From a bowshot away."

They saved their breath for walking, and soon breasted a rise that revealed their destination. Long Valley Screed was a fertile pocket torn from the tree-covered hills, almost bluffs, so sheer shelves of yellow sandstone were exposed. Only the east side lay open. Perched on a knoll to the north was a small hall, more hunting lodge than manor house, the Duke of Lancaster's. Elsewhere, cottages and byres lay higgledy-piggledy amidst fields of barley, rye, and wheat that shone red-gold in the late-afternoon sun.

Robin instinctively nocked his arrow. "Something's amiss."

"Aye." With no threat of rain, everyone from priest to crofter should have been harvesting. Instead, the rabbits and crows had the fields to themselves.

Robin Hood pointed across the valley where a bright stream spilled from a cleft in the hillside. "There. At the mill."

"Woe betide the miller."

Woe indeed. The whole village of two hundred had gathered outside the gristmill.

Marian stopped to watch the women. One—pretty, Saxon, blond, and slim—wore a gown of red sarcenet and taffeta that marked her from her drab neighbours like an oriole over ouzels, though she was dusty as any from winnowing. She wept uncontrollably.

The men clustered at the door, peeking in. They hushed and stared at Robin. Two greeted the tall archer by name, though he didn't know theirs. "Hail and met well. What transpires within?"

"Our miller's dead," said a man with salty beard and a cast in one eye. "Fell through the floorboards into his own works."

"It's a shilling that killed him," said another elder.

"A shilling?" asked the outlaw. "How's that?"

"Old Hosea'd pinch a farthing till it squealed. Our carpenter, Geoffrey, told him a mote a' times the floor was rotten from damp. Offered to replace his floorboards at a shilling apiece. Hosea saved himself some coin, then paid in blood." Other men muttered about Hosea's parsimony.

"Speak not ill of the dead, lest they long for company," Robin advised. "Now excuse me." He pushed past.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The gristmill was small. Centermost were two round millstones supported by posts above and below, and a hopper to feed them. Round about were a workbench of tools, a corner fireplace, a stair up and down, sacks and baskets of grain heaped high. A loft ringed the room, one side the miller's quarters, the remaining space stacked with sacks of flour. Out two small windows, shutters wide, Robin saw the great mossy millwheel had stopped.

By the twin millstones was a squarish hole in the floor. Robin peeked through and found why the mill was silent.

Up in the loft, three dusty men moved sacks of flour to thump the walls. Two wore tabards of coarse linen, the third a knight's surcoat of lawn, all red with King Richard's three lions barred by French fleur-de-lis. Two servants, then, of the Duke of Lancaster, and the steward knight who maintained the fief in the lord's absence. They'd undoubtedly come to collect the heriot and mortuary, the death taxes.

The steward rubbed his nose, sneezed, clapped hands over his ears to keep out evil spirits. He was square-cut, clean-shaven, stern-faced. "Begone, villein! No one's to enter, by order of the duke!"

"No villein I, but a free man," Robin called up. "I see your miller's dead."

Accustomed to obedience, the knight turned imperious. "Free man or no, hie your arse out yon door or I'll spank it along! We've business to attend! Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Martin of Lincoln. Your delving has yet to turn up any silver, I'd guess."

The steward leant on the railing, brushed his breast. "You wear the green of Lincoln, I see, but then so does the devil and Robin Hood. And only that wolf's head and Welshmen carry bows taller than their heads."

"Take me for a bowyer then,"—Robin smiled—"late of Wales and fetching this oddity along. In my travels, I've seen something of coin and hiding spots. May I help ferret out your lord's tithe? If he lacks his share, so do you."

The steward sneezed again. He studied the outlaw and the woman who came in after him. "Very well. If you find it, you'll receive a sixteenth. If not, I'll scourge you for intruding. Strikes you fair?"

"Let us conjoin and see what we strike. I'll begin below."

"Below? But—"

"Wait here, will you, uh, Matilda?" Marian would see the knight did nothing untoward, like rouse his followers to capture a wanted outlaw.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Robin descended the stairwell. The cellar was dank, the walls slimy stone. Slivers of light from cracks between the floorboards added to the dungeon air. Millpond water trickled through the foundation and made a gutter of mud. Stripes of flour matched the cracks overhead.

A torch of folded beech bark was stuck in the mud. Robin Hood picked it up, fanned it brighter. He flinched as something flittered overhead like an errant autumn leaf, then skittered up the stairway. A bat in the daytime: a sure sign of death.

By the light of the new-broken hole in the floorboards and the torch, Robin traced the millworks and the miller's unfortunate path.

Outside, Robin had seen, was a spring-fed millpond shored by a stone-and-mud dike. Alongside the building, nestled in a pit, was a mill wheel ten feet high. A wooden sluice channeled water that overshot the wheel and filled its deep buckets, so both the force and weight of the water turned the wheel. The millshaft passed through the stone wall and ended in an oaken crown wheel with cogged teeth like a whale's jaw. This vertical wheel, or gear, turned a matching horizontal gear. Its post rose through the ceiling and turned a grooved millstone of granite. Atop that sat a stationary stone surmounted by a hopper.

The miller had only to lean out the window and open the sluice gate to start all these shafts and wheels spinning, and thus the millstones grinding. He filled the hopper with grain, where it settled between the millstones and was sheared to flour that trickled out the grooves onto a catchboard. The miller swept the flour into sacks. For his services, he got a sixteenth of the flour, while the owner, the lord of the manor, got two sixteenths. Thus millers tended to be the second-richest men in the community.

This miller had valued his money over his mill.

Hosea of Long Valley Screed had been bald and near-toothless, with the paunch of a rich man. His weight had been his undoing, it seemed. A rotten floorboard had shattered and dropped him into the cellar. Half-impaled on the horizontal gear, one fat knee had jammed where the gears closed. Under the terrible power of the millwheel, wooden teeth had rent skin and flesh, then snapped.

Trapped, Hosea had bled to death. In agony, to judge by the lines etched in his face. He lay propped against the descending post, arms outspread. Blood had spattered gears and posts and miller. Its coppery stink compounded the fug of mud and moss.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Spooked, the outlaw wondered that the torch stayed lit: It should extinguish near a corpse. Robin crossed himself and muttered the Lord's Prayer to quiet the miller's soul.

"Rob?"

"H-here, Marian."

His wife tripped down the stairs, ducking to admit her back quiver. "They hunt hard money. They're not after us." Ofttimes, sheriffs or barons or forest rangers imposed bounties on Robin's outlaws, usually two pounds, same as for a wolf's head. The church always rescinded the bounty, yet rumours persisted and inflated it to ten pounds, fifty, five hundred.

Marian assessed the scene. "The price of sloth, poor man."

"Aye. He neglected his mill and it killed him."

"And in dying, killed the mill." Marian wrinkled her nose, sniffed at the man's face. "Drunk, too. That helped. Though he smells . . ."

"Like a brewery?"

"No. Like a vineyard. Where would a miller get wine this time of year?"

Robin nodded upwards. "I dislike that floorboard."

"Eh?"

He raised the torch to examine the splintery ends of the plank framing the hole. Snapped off clean against the joists, the boards were punky gray along the bottom from rot, but the middles were pale yellow. The outlaw pulled out his Irish knife and tapped. "That heart is sound as Little John's arm. It shouldn't have broken."

"He had a heavy tread."

"No. I could rear a war-horse atop oak this thick." Handing Marian the torch, he picked up fragments of floorboard, moved under the square hole for light, and fitted them together like a puzzle.

"A small horse, perhaps," offered Marian. "Maybe he shouldered a hundredweight of grain while standing in the wrong spot?"

More head-shaking. The outlaw plucked something feathery from a splintered edge. "Fibers. A rope was wrapped around this board. But that wouldn't break it even if someone yanked hard."

"Someone down here?"

"Where else?" Robin took the torch, prowled the cellar floor. Grit clung to his deerhide boots. The gutter of mud and blood marred the middle, but the rest of the floor was sand stained dark by oak-leaf tannin, striped light by flour. Half-hunched, Robin searched, then grunted. Marian joined him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Twin footprints faced a corner. Robin dabbed at a white jot in one heelprint. "Bat dung. Fresh, just this morning. And the edges of the footprints are still sharp."

Marian peered around her husband's shoulder. "Why face the corner?"

"There's a woman's question," Robin jibed. He leaned over the footprints and sniffed in the corner like a hound. "He drained his bladder."

"Oh." Marian rubbed her nose. "So someone *was* down here."

"Someone with narrow feet and good shoes."

The outlaw crossed to the corpse. One leg was folded under the body, so Robin whispered another prayer as he wiggled the torn shoe off the leg mangled in the gears. It jiggled sickeningly. "His ankle's broken."

"A lot of him's broken, poor man."

With Marian holding the torch, Robin compared the miller's shoe against the footprints. Almost twice as wide. Marian murmured, "Fat men's feet spread to bear their weight."

As Robin replaced the shoe, the hole was eclipsed by a frowning head. The steward called down, "If you seek to rob the dead, I've already searched him."

Marian countered, "Where is the priest?"

The frown deepened. "Father Peter's so old he's abed most of the day. They'll fetch the corpse to him. I said a prayer of contrition, but Hosea had too many sins for one Hail Mary to absolve."

Floorboards creaked, shoes scuffled. Four villagers clattered down the narrow stairs toting a wide plank. It was grim work to pry Hosea's body from the gears. They roped the corpse to carry it up sideways. Robin and Marian followed, blinking in the daylight.

Still within the mill, a wise woman loosened the knots in Hosea's clothing, sprinkled salt on his chest, and saw he was lugged out the door feet-first, precautions to keep his spirit within his body. Outside, women wailed in sympathy for the new widow. Villagers pressed forward to touch the corpse's brow, encouraging their children to do the same, to prevent nightmares. The woman in the silk robe swooned and had to be supported by both elbows.

The Vixen of Sherwood, nodding to herself, then shoved through the crowd, grabbed the young widow's left hand, and clapped it on the corpse's face.

Shocked, the girl bleated. Women stopped sobbing to buzz at their neighbours. Men grunted. Marian ignored them. Still clamping the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

girl's hand, she watched the miller's mutilated leg. Then she hemmed, begged pardon of the wife, and returned to the doorstep.

"What was that all in aid of?" asked her husband.

"Tell you later."

The steward ordered the bearers to move on. Fuddled, sobbing, mumbling, the villagers trailed after the bier. Hosea and his wife and neighbours would spend the night on vigil in the chapel. The only one remaining was the wise woman, who washed the threshold to banish contamination.

Inside, the evening sun slanted sharp and golden through western windows. Clouds of dust danced in the sunbeams. The two servants idly tapped walls. The steward folded his arms as if to butt the intruders out the door. "Are you finished prying then? There's nothing for you here."

He was surprised at Robin's mild inquiry. "How are you called, good sirrah?"

The steward blinked. "*Sir* Luther, *Martin* of Lincoln."

"Luther, you seem a smart and capable man. We've somewhat to tell you."

Nonplussed by their casual affront to authority, the knight waggled both hands. "I've no time to dally with wastrels. Tell me where he kept his money or get ye gone."

"Oh yes, his fortune . . . " Robin stroked his beard. "Where have you looked?"

"Everywhere!" The knight gestured, making dust swirl. "There isn't a lot to search, but it must be here. Hosea, honest fellow, wasn't one to bury anything in the forest, not fat-as-butter he. And there are prying eyes throughout the valley."

Robin only nodded. Marian said, "Have you asked his wife?"

"Yes. She claims not to know. She may not. Her husband was old but no dotard. Elgiva spent money faster than the man could make it, questing after fancy gowns to lord over the parish.

"But then his fortune may not be here," he corrected with a sigh. "Our good miller hauled his share of flour to Werchesop every fortnight. Mayhaps he banked his coin with some Jew or Roman, though we've found no tally sticks, either. And traveling, he'd need worry about thieves, of which we've plenty on the roads hereabouts." He glared at Robin.

"Fear more the men of law and God who rob you. You can't call them to court." The archer scanned the main floor, crowded with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

baskets and sacks of grain, the loft heaped with sacks of milled flour. "Let me see. . . ."

Handing Marian his bow, he mounted the staircase to the loft, walked to a corner where three sacks sat alone. Humming, he moved two sacks and pulled out the cornermost one. Rat-gnawed brown flour trickled out. People below watched in wonder as Robin thumped the sack on the floor three times, then hoisted it, felt the bottom, and chuckled. He untied the top, shot in his arm to the pit, and pulled out a dusty round something he blew clean and tossed down to Luther.

It was a purse chock full of silver: pennies, shillings, half-crowns, and a few crowns.

"How . . . ?" began the knight.

Robin descended, brushing his arm. "Men hide things in familiar places. A cordwainer favours a money belt, a crofter a false bottom in a chest, a tailor secret pockets. Millers hide their money in flour. It wouldn't be in the grain down here, for it's yet to be milled, so it must be above. The largest heap of sacks belong to the village, those six to his lordship, which leaves three the miller's fee. Any coin would be in the hardest-to-reach sack. Simple."

"Simple," muttered Luther. "Withal, I promised you a sixteenth part, so we needs count it."

Robin waved a dusty hand. "No need. Send to the alehouse and we'll be quits."

"What?" The knight laughed. "Better, dine with me at the hall. It's not often I entertain such a distinguished—bowyer."

"Done!" said Robin.

Long Valley Hall was indeed an old Norman hunting lodge, a single-story stone hall with the kitchen and solar at the back. On benches at a long plank table, Robin and Marian partook of a fine harvest meal: liver from pigs and cows gone to slaughter, a plentitude of rabbits killed by scythes. Many, many pots of dark foamy stout were fetched from the alehouse.

Sir Luther's wife, Lady Arelina, was cool towards the strangers until Marian whispered that they too were gentry, Sir Robert Locksley and Lady Marian. (She omitted that they were also nobility, the Earl and Countess of Huntingdon.) The two knights soon discovered they had both besieged Acre, and talked long of famine, pestilence, Saracen ambushes and torture, diseased prostitutes, raving madmen, mountains of rotting corpses, sun so strong it seared a man's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hand to touch his own armour. It bemused the women that the men laughed so often.

"This is fine stout." Robin reached for more drink and missed the pitcher. "It's got body. But what I meant to tell you, Luther, a long time ago, was . . . what? Oh, how curious is this mill—miller's death." He explained what they'd found poking in the cellar.

Trying to refill Robin's tankard, Luther emptied the ale on the table. "Oops. I dislike it, Robin. Bits of rope and narrow footprints and bat dung. It seems a lot of mugger-hug—hugmug——hugger-mugger. I found a hole and a dead miller. His footprints in the—what do you call it—flour. It seems very simple, like you finding that—purse." A servant had to refill their tankards.

"It's sup-supposed to." Robin gestured and knocked his tankard into his lap. "Oh my. Someone with narrow feet—tiny little feet—made it look that way. But I'm guessing. I'm wet, too."

Luther dropped his voice to a slurred whisper. "It's not fay folk, is it? Good. 'Course not. But who could sunder an oak board by yanking a rope? Not me. And how could they know Hosea, bless him, honest fellow, would fall in the hole? How drunk could a man be to not see a hole at his feet? Too drunk to work. If I had a hole here now, I could see it. Right there, like. And t'weren't a wide hole. Narrower than his fat belly. He would'a stuck fast. An assas—assas— a killer would needs jump on his shoulders to punch him through."

Robin waved his pot and almost clopped his wife in the jaw. Marian wrestled it away. "Right-o. I love you so, Marian. You're so beau'ful it pains to look at you. Hunh? Oh, agreed, agreed. Can't prove what I didn't see, or what I did see. But if it was delib—delib—real, who profits by his death? Had he enemies?"

"Doesn't every miller?" Luther laughed. "They're all skimmers. Hosea was the worst thievin' bastard o' all, bless his soul. But whyn't 'hey turn the mill upside down after his purse?"

"His wife—widow—interests me," said Marian suddenly. " 'Dimples in the chin, devil within.' "

"May married to December," put in Arelina. " 'A man who takes a young wife buys himself a peck of trouble.' "

The men gaped as if the women had just descended from Heaven. Robin fumbled with a knife to cut bread, had it taken away. He used a crust to sop ale off the wet table. "Who's miller now, with the harvest 'pon you?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Luther waved a hand. "A young scalawag on the Poulter there. Seymour, journeyman to his father. 'E comes often, helps repair and such, carts flour home. We've good soil in this old riverbed."

"Was he around today?" asked Marian.

"Nay, not for weeks. I'd know if he were 'round. Everyone in the valley knows 'im. Speakin' of which, I better dispatch a rider t' Carberton t' fetch him." He pushed at the table to rise, snagged his heel on the chair leg, crashed back down. "Well, it's too late anyway."

Marian persisted. "Would this Seymour know he's to assume the milling?"

Luther shrugged muzzily. "I s'pose so."

"Is he young?" asked Marian.

"Aye," said Arelina. "Handsome in a callow way."

Robin laughed. "Are you thinking of marrying again, Marian? Marry, Marian marryin' again!" He and Luther hooted.

"No, but I wonder how big this Seymour's feet are."

"I thought women cared about the size of a man's somethin' else!" roared Luther, and they laughed until their sides ached. "Ah, Robin. I'm glad you came. You've saved me hardship, findin' that purse. 'Twere marvelous how you done it."

Robin roamed the room after a full pitcher. " 'Twasn't me, 'twas one of my men. An idiot to boot. Much the Miller' Son. He's a miller's son, son of a miller. We met him on the King's Road one day, decided to play with him. It were a slow day. Told him to produce his silver—millers always have money—or we'd string him up. But he fooled us. He said t'was buried in the flour. He dug around—quite an act for an idiot—and whipped big handfuls in our faces. Poof! Ay, it stung! Then he whacked us with a cudgel till our bones ached. Bunged my knee for a week. But he used his head, thick as 'twas. When his father died, the bailiff turned the gristmill . . . over to someone else and threw Much out. We came . . . fetched him . . . What *is* it, Marian?"

His wife crooked her little finger to her mouth. "What my husband would call a harebrained scheme."

Robin tried to whistle, fizzed instead. "Someone's in for it."

"Aye," said his wife. "You. Would you become a miller?"

"What? You're potted, Marian!"

"No, I've got a plan. Are you game?"

Luther and Arelina looked perplexed. Robin thought, shrugged. "I've been a butcher and a potter, why not a miller? Hoy, we're dry! Send for more stout!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No!" pronounced the women.

Early the next morning, Elgiva was pitched out of her home.

"Oh, please, *please,* kind sir, you *can't* do this! You *can't!*"

Young and slim and pretty, the widow tried every charm to make Luther relent. She hung on his arm, wrung her hands, cajoled, pleaded, sobbed. But the steward coldly told her the gristmill was property of the duke, his to mete out. She was finished. From the loft, the two servants carried down Elgiva's chattel: a chair, two carved and painted chests of clothes, a triptych of Christ on the Cross, an effigy of Saint Audry, an iron pot and a spoon. They laid it outside the door.

Elgiva turned bitter. "You'll be sorry, Sir Luther! I'll tell Lord Lancaster what you've done at the manor court! He won't like it! Hosea, honest husband, was a good miller and I a good miller's wife! You can't cast us out—and I want my fortune!"

"You'll get that once we find it," Luther lied. He pulled the half door shut and rode off with the lord's huntsman. Elgiva's curses echoed across the valley.

Meantime, the new miller scooped water from the sluice and lugged buckets to the cellar. Robin mopped the gears clean, but could not wash out the bloodstains. "Proof enough he was murdered." He crossed himself.

In the village, Marian tended the outlaws' original business. Every autumn, before winter rains made roads impassable, they circumnavigated Sherwood Forest. This fief lay just within its ragged northern border. They renewed contacts in the villages and dispensed hard-won coins. Outlaws could not survive without the support of common folk, and both groups ofttimes needed to hide out, to borrow food or money, to ask favours or justice or succor. The Fox and Vixen of Sherwood toted up who was still alive, still on their side, still reliable. Marian reiterated that any "beggars" who braved the dark winter forest to fetch news to the Greenwood would receive coin, food, and protection.

Marian asked other questions, too. About millers, and young wives, and journeymen, and lepers, and wine.

Having cleaned the machinery, Robin fetched tools and whittled new teeth for the gears. By noon, he could open the sluice gate. Water rushed and splashed, the wheel buckets filled, and slowly the ponderous wheel turned. Excited as a child building a sandcastle against the tide, Robin ran downstairs as the rumbling wheel gained

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

speed. In the dim light, he watched the gears tunk smoothly, heard the millstones grind overhead.

Alone, he crowed, "Brilliant, Master Robin, sterling! Very clever work, I must say!"

Chuckling, Robin leaned out a hand, grabbed something moving, snatched his hand away, lost his balance, and flopped on the muddy floor.

Swearing, he swiped muck off his trousers. "Pride goeth before a fall, Master Robin, and it serves you right."

In the dimness, he'd leant against the thick millshaft that connected the waterwheel and crown wheel. "Fool, that turns too! . . . Oh. . . . *Turns.*"

But the fleeting thought was erased by a new distraction. A noise.

Groaning.

Robin cocked his head. Tolling steadily, every few seconds, came a low moan. Like a dog in a trap, or a cow with a full udder.

Holding his breath, Robin tiptoed, squatted, peered at the revolving gears and rotating posts. He couldn't locate the sound. But for the first time, he noticed how the machinery seemed alive. Like a great horse or dragon, leashed and harnessed, but poised to turn on its master at the first chance.

The groaning rang on and on. Real but untouchable.

Like a ghost.

Robin Hood fled up the stairs.

Later that afternoon as Robin filled the hopper and scraped flour into sacks—and tried to ignore the groaning—a young man knocked at the threshold.

Red-eyed Elgiva was just behind him. Handsome in a soft, beardless way, the lad was proud in his neat yellow smock, sky blue hose, and round hat.

His feet, the outlaw noted, were narrower than his hands.

Seymour, journeyman miller to his father Uland in Carberton, was earnest and sincere, solicitous of Elgiva's plight. Luther had cast her out without a penny, and what might she do to gain back the knight's graces. Seymour could help her mill. The job should rightfully have gone to him anyway, since he'd spent years repairing the gristmill, and had been Hosea's trusted friend. Was Robin capable to mill, and might he need a journeyman?

When his talk availed nothing, Elgiva loosed her tongue. "You shouldn't even be here! It's not right and it's not fair! You come out

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of that accursed forest, a murderin' outlaw with blood on his hands, and take work away from decent folk! You'll be in strife when Lord Lancaster comes through! He'll set dogs on you and your strumpet wife—"

Seymour jumped in. "And you'll ruin this mill with your meddling! Already you've thrown the wheel out of kilter or neglected to grease somethin'! It never did groan like that before!"

Robin opened the door wider to let the sound travel. "Perhaps the mill mourns a master done wrong. Perhaps it cries for vengeance. What say you?"

The two young people shut up, turned white as ghosts. Seymour's hands shook. Elgiva backed away.

From the lodge, two horses danced down the valley. As planned, the huntsman had watched for Seymour and fetched Sir Luther. They reined in before the mill, hooves throwing mud. The knight nudged his bay palfrey sideways, swiped Seymour across the shoulder with a quirt.

"Get ye gone, wastrel! I've appointed this man miller and not you, and I'll stand no gainsaying my decision! Now hie yourself back to Carberton before I whip you out of the valley, and never come back! And you, trollop, get out of my sight!"

Luther ordered the huntsman to escort Seymour home, at the end of a rope if necessary. After a hasty and tearful farewell, the boy shouldered his satchel and scampered up the road, while Hosea's widow hiked her skirts and pegged for the village.

"There," the knight sighed. "He's driven out, but Elgiva must stay till we find the money. I hope your wife knows what she's about."

"She always does," Robin smiled, "better than I."

"What you're about or she's about?"

"Either. I'm married long enough not to argue. I'm broke to the yoke."

Luther nodded, "You and me both. Lean into the harness and avoid the goad. You've got the mill turning. Good. But what's that benighted groaning? It sounds like—"

He stopped.

"I'm glad you needs spend the night and not me." The knight pelted away, leaving Robin to his haunted mill.

That evening, Marian returned from the village with their supper. Robin showed off his work, and she congratulated him, but added, "Why does it moan so? It sounds like a thirsty ox. Or—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Robin raised a hand to stop her. His elation at fixing the mill had evaporated. He leaned out the window and dropped the sluice gate. Gradually the mossy wheel rolled to a halt. The silence was brittle after the unceasing groans.

They kindled a fire outside and ate supper there. "So what of your day, Marian? What have you gleaned?" Glad to change the subject, she caught him up on their outlawry business, but had little else to add. Robin was too tired to note his wife was deep in thought.

They slept outdoors.

Marian left before dawn, toting a satchel and bow, no hint of her destination. Her departure might have miffed Robin had he not done the same so often.

Robin fell to milling and found he liked it. Once he'd loaded the wooden hopper over the millstones, there was little to do except scoop flour from the cupboard. He replaced the missing floorboard with another plucked from the loft. Prowling after work, and grumbling at Hosea's laziness, he hauled sacks away from the walls, dug out rotting sprouting mouldy grain and pitched it to the birds. He put down pallets and restacked the bags. He stomped so many rats and mice that he turned to the village and traded a silver ha' penny for a big brindled cat. He tested the scale and its iron weights, one against another.

He'd have loved the work if not for the infernal moan. In desperation, he fetched lard from the village and greased every moving part. Nothing diminished the groaning, though while smearing the big crown wheel he made a curious discovery. He thought to tell Marian later.

But Marian didn't return that night, so he paid a penny for bread and meat and beer at the alehouse, then slept under a bush. Another day found the harvest in full swing, men cutting, children stacking, women winnowing. Wagons heaped high rolled to the mill door. Robin fed the hopper and stitched sacks.

Yet the villagers couldn't quite believe Robin Hood the Outlaw had turned Robin the Miller. And when they drew close enough to hear the groaning, they froze. Some prayed, some feigned deafness, but no one lingered, and eventually none would pass the door. Robin missed Marian.

At supper, the new miller got his wife back. She was puffy and dusty but bursting with news.

"Remember that leper we passed the other day? I learned in the village he hobbles through here every fortnight!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They braised pig's heart and trotters over the fire, stuffed with fresh rye bread. "So? Any beggar must. Friar Tuck had a regular circuit. And a leper cadges coins quick, because no one wants him to dally."

"No, no, no." Marian waved a greasy hand. "Remember Sir Luther said Hosea, may he rest in peace, fetched his grain to market every fortnight? The village women told me he would leave Thursday forenoons, spend Friday at the market, then return Saturday to make Mass Sunday. The *leper* passed through midday Thursday, then left the valley Saturday in the forenoon. Do you see? Hosea leaves, the leper arrives, the leper goes, Hosea returns."

"Every fortnight? That's curious, I guess."

"There's more! I've been from the Poulter to the Ryton. A fox crossed my path so I knew I'd have good luck! I asked of the merchants, the bailiffs, and the midwives. No one in either town ever sees the leper! Only Long Valley Screed sees him!"

"Well . . . " Robin chewed slowly as his mind worked. "He could cut over the hills. Hard with rotten feet, though. . . . Maybe they won't admit the bugger to those towns, or threatened to kill him. . . ."

"Mull it over," said his wife. "Oh, and tomorrow you go roving. I need you to track something."

Robin recoiled in mock horror. "Not I! My tracking days are done. I'm a miller now!" Marian shoved him, but he bobbed back up like a hedgehog. "Oh! I found something! Come see!"

He plucked up a firebrand and shivvied her inside, then down. By flickering light, Robin laid his wife's hand on the thick shaft that connected the millwheel and gears. "Feel? Where's it gone? Ah, here! See? More rope fibers! What does that tell you?"

"Little, I fear." Marian shivered. "Engines are a mystery to me."

"Then understand this!" He explained his idea.

Marian nodded, but still shivered. "Brilliant, Rob. Very clever. May we leave now?"

The firebrand popped a knot and extinguished. Smothered in gloom, the outlaw raced up the stairs.

"It was clever to find that rope trick. Mayhaps you can turn miller if outlawry becomes unwelcome."

"Or illegal?" joked her husband. They were back in the forest, a half-mile along the road to Carberton. Brush tickled at their elbows.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Outlawry and milling have much in common. I—Hark! There's your track!"

The outlaw squatted, moved a fresh oak leaf. "There's a toe print. And see that line where the brush is swept back? No deer made that—it's from a man's shinbone." Marian agreed, though she saw none of it.

Robin slid through bracken after the faint trail, halted at a forked oak. He plucked away a broken branch with withered leaves to expose a bundle in the tree's crotch.

"Ha! Show this to Will Stutly, who claims I can't track a bleeding bull through a king's ball! And here . . ."

He stooped and uncovered a staff hidden under leaves. A clank made him turn, and he yelped. Marian had pulled down the filthy gray robe. A tin bell dropped out.

"By my faith, Marian! Don't touch a leper's robes!"

Marian batted the robe flat. "Fret not. If I'm right, this be all of the leper." From her satchel she drew a redware crock and soaked the robe with a whitish liquid reeking of musk: tallow. She stashed the garment back in the tree, replaced the camouflaging branch, flicked back her tresses, and smiled. "Done."

Gingerly, Robin plucked an ash leaf from her hair. "What about the leper?"

A smug smile. "If I've guessed right, there's no need for the leper anymore. But if I've *plotted* aright, we shall see him anyway."

"As you say, dear." Robin pushed brush aside with his bow. "I needs get back anyway. Wheat's to be winnowed this morn. And I needs rig a barrel trap to drown rats. And did I say I tested the weights? One was shinier than the others, heavier by half, what Hosea used to measure his share."

"Next you'll be curing chin-cough holding children over the hopper." Marian laughed. "You'll make a burgher yet."

"And you an obedient goodwife?"

Marian laughed again.

Three days later, Marian called through the window. "Rob! *Honey!* Will you fetch more wood?"

Robin topped off the hopper, then crossed to the window. Marian didn't want firewood. Any call was a signal to come watch. He chuckled. "Clever thing, my Marian."

Shuffling on crippled feet, shrouded by a hood, down the muddy road into the valley came the leper, clinking his bell and uttering his lament. "Unclean! Unclean! 'Ware the leper!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Close by the road, Marian tended a fire under a cauldron, pretended to stir washing. As the leper came abreast, she turned her back so as not to breathe contagion.

But once past, she snatched up a firebrand, flitted up behind the leper, and set fire to his robe.

Tallow-soaked wool ignited with a ripple. The leper whirled at the heat and smell and smoke, then shrieked. He dropped his staff and ran flat out. Marian ran hard behind him.

Robin pelted out the doorway. "What the bloody living hell . . . ?"

When the flaming leper had run a hundred feet, Marian caught up and hooked his foot with her own. The man slammed down. Kicking, she flipped him over, rolled him in the dirt, and snuffed the fire.

Robin arrived just as Marian jerked back the hood. Revealed was Seymour, journeyman miller.

"A real leper can't run," Marian panted. "Their toes are the first things to rot off."

Robin stroked his beard. Seymour wept.

The Vixen of Sherwood poured herself another tot of stout and saluted the men who scooped flour into sacks.

"I saw right off he weren't a real leper. He wasn't crippled, nor did he stink of corruption. But some poor souls pose as lepers because they feel unclean, or wish to suffer penance. Or they have some rash like eczema, or Saint Anthony's fire, or scrofula, so are branded lepers. But I said nothing, for it wasn't my business.

"*Until* I heard that Hosea, rest his merry, drove to market every fortnight, and during his absence, this leper passed through. Yet no other village saw him. Thus, someone donned a leper's disguise just for Long Valley Screed.

"Elgiva is young and pretty, but shows a venal streak. I suspected her right away. That's why I forced her hand onto the corpse to see if it bled at its murderer's touch. She passed the trial of bleeding, but only because she didn't kill with her own hand.

"She married the miller for money, then found love when Seymour came to make repairs. But everyone knew Seymour, so he couldn't visit with Hosea gone without creating talk. Thus he adopted a disguise—perfect, because people would shun him. He wore it again today, since Luther forbade him to return.

"Elgiva schemed to keep her money and position, yet gain a new husband—Seymour, next in line to be miller. One night she un-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

barred the door, admitted Seymour, and hid him in the cellar. Hosea, bless him, had no need to go down there. Seymour waited so long he had to splatter the corner.

"That day at dinner Elgiva gave Hosea brandy—his breath smelt of wine. 'Twas his favourite drink, so say the villagers, but she usually denied him. Once he was tipsy, she hied to the village to winnow, which she's always shunned as beneath her. That left Hosea 'alone' to have his accident, thanks to Seymour."

"But *how?*" demanded Luther. "He's a skinny titch! He hadn't the strength to manhandle a fat tub like Hosea!"

Robin bounced a sack to settle the flour. "Easy enough if you know how. If you're a miller. All he needed do—wait, I'll show you. I'd like to see myself."

The outlaw-turned-miller propped the sack on the catchboard above the new floor plank. He kneaded a corner of the sack into a ball and tied it off with twine. "That's Hosea's foot." Robin then caught up a rope and skipped down the stairs.

The only sound was the rumble and creak of the big wheel outside, the muffled tunking of gears below, the grinding of millstones. And the infernal groan.

Coming from below, Robin's shuttered voice was startling. "Here we go! Hosea, poor fool, is drunk, staggering round and round. I'm Seymour. I see his outline against the light. Quick like, I—"

Through cracks in the floor, Luther and Marian watched the outlaw's fingers work. He poked a slipknot up past the new plank, winkled it across, pulled it back down, shoved the noose up again to encircle the floorboard. Deftly, he flicked the slipknot over the balled "foot" on the flour sack. Then his hands disappeared.

Another pause, then, "Here comes the good part!"

Suddenly alive as a snake, the rope slithered around the plank, tightened, snatched the sack off the catchboard. The floorboard creaked, groaned, bent—and shattered. The sack was sucked down as if by a whirlpool.

They heard the bag tear. Flour fountained out of the hole.

The great millwheel shuddered to a halt. Sneezing resounded below.

Marian and Luther pattered down the stairs to find Robin Hood pale brown with flour. The shorn sack was jammed in the gears. The rope was wound around the millwheel shaft.

The dusty outlaw wiped his eyes, wheezed, "That's the link Luther and I missed. We wondered how little Seymour could break a board

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and drag a fat miller through the hole. But he was a miller too.

"Remember, a man hides money where he's comfortable? Seymour figured how an engine can kill a man. This millshaft pulls hard as a yoke of oxen. He had only to slip the noose over Hosea's foot and tie on here. I found rope fibers on the shaft. And Hosea's ankle was broken.

"Once Hosea crashed onto the cogs, he was stuck, probably stunned. Seymour shifted his leg between the gears, then watched his rival bleed to death. And having finished an honest day's work, he donned his disguise and fled back to Carberton, there to await word of the tragedy in Long Valley Screed."

Robin grinned. "His bad luck, though. He passed my wife, she with the eyes of a hawk." Marian smiled.

Dusty as any miller, Robin Hood led them upstairs. He closed the sluice gate, clumped back down, tugged the sack from the gears, checked that no teeth were broken, and clumped back up.

Luther paced around the fresh hole. "To think I'd have left it an accident, and given Seymour the mill! Now we'll hang both of them! So we'll need another miller. . . . You, uh, wouldn't want the job?"

"Third time's the charm, eh?" laughed Robin. "No, I—"

Surprised, he stopped. He'd miss milling. It was safe, sedate, useful, satisfying. He imagined a life tending the millworks and bagging flour, meeting neighbours day in and out, working a lathe or saw in winter, growing fat and bald. No more campfires or smoked venison, no more birdsong, no more dappled light illuminating his greenwood cathedral. . . .

"No, I'm afraid not, but thank you for the kind offer. I'll return to what I know."

"And that is?" smiled the knight. Marian giggled.

Robin scratched his grayed beard. "What did I say I was? Ah, yes! A bowmaker!"

Chuckling, he leaned out the window and jerked open the sluice gate. Slowly, slowly, the millwheel turned. Slowly the millstones began to grind.

But no one spoke. They listened. And heard nothing.

The groaning was gone. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Michael Luth is a native Coloradan who currently makes his living as circulation manager for a national financial daily. He tells us that he has been writing fiction almost since he learned to read at the age of four, but has only recently begun to submit his work to magazines. His first published work reflects his interest in the psychology behind a criminal act . . .

THE WALKING STICK

by MICHAEL LUTH

Gene fingered the cold metal object in his jacket pocket and continued his wait, hunkering his shoulders against the wind. He had been playing with the thing absentmindedly to make the time pass, his index finger tracing the flat edge, following the circumference from the blunt-ended shaft to the narrow, tapering point. When he realized what he was doing, he smiled to himself, recalling the owner of the object. If things went well, it would be returned.

He had to show it to Vicky first. She would see it and it would help his cause. He turned it around and around, thinking what he would tell her when she arrived. He just had to win her back. It had taken so long to get her to meet with him. She would listen, he knew, when she realized how much he loved her and how miserable he was without her. The beginning of the end of that misery had started only yesterday, here by the river.

The day had held the promise of Indian summer with the appearance of a fuzzy, October-like sun, but there was slushy, dirty snow beside the trail and it was January and only forty-five degrees. Gene held the soda bottle by the twist-off cap, swinging it at his side as his feet propelled him along the asphalt trail that ran beside the Cache la Poudre River. When he came to the footbridge, he trudged up the

© 1995 by Michael Luth.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

incline and across the span, stopping in the middle. He opened the bottle, took a swig, and looked out over the slowly moving river.

The water was strangely high for January and the only icy patches lay in the shadows from the scruffy, leafless willows on the south bank of the river. Far downstream, in a quiet, wide stretch, he saw several ducks gently rocking with the current. He watched them for a while, sipping his soda, but his mind floated off with the sound of the rushing water and he began to think about Vicky.

He missed her body and wanted to hold her, if only for a moment. She had been so wonderful to touch and hold, and when she touched him back, her learned, gentle way of being sexual was so foreign to anything he'd experienced with any other woman that he felt she had invented it herself. That you could approach ecstasy from a quiet hand-holding place and reach it so easily and completely without the wild tearing and screaming run at it he'd always assumed was necessary, had been a revelation. And now he might never know it again.

A deep sigh took his breath away as completely as a punch in the stomach. More than anything he missed her simple presence. Just being in the same room with her and hearing her talk, listening to her enthusiasm over a book she had read or the taste of a pastry she'd made from a magazine recipe. She was so wide in her interests and so rich in her passions that he felt humble and a little naive. He'd always believed his mother had ruined him for strong, knowing women before she had gone, but he had been wrong. There was something special about Vicky, and now, God help him, now she wouldn't even see him, wouldn't even return his calls. She even managed to be out of the office when he made his coffee deliveries to her building.

Gene crossed to the other side of the bridge, went down the embankment and off the main trail, taking the muddy path that snaked through the trees on the north side of the river. He lost thought of her for a few minutes as he worked his way between the puddles and dirty snow patches, making a game of not getting his shoes dirty. He succeeded fairly well until he suddenly heard her voice, as clearly as if she were walking behind him.

"You're twenty-seven and I'm forty-five. That's just too much of a difference. I didn't think it was at first, but then I didn't think things would go this far. We, I mean I, made a mistake. Let's just be thankful for what we had and go on."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This was her phone voice, words she'd told him after finally returning three days' worth of unanswered messages. She'd shown some concern about their differences in education, but seemed most concerned about their ages. He had thought that it would pass, that she would come to believe how little it mattered to him, but it had blown up in his face.

Gene came to a broad open space, a meadow with a large pond. Even though it was well above freezing, the pond was covered with ice and the ice was littered with branches and large stones. The mountains, the front range of the Rockies, rose up in the distance behind the pond. He walked over to one of the pair of picnic tables along the pond's east bank and arranged himself so he could look out at the pond and the mountains. The sun was surprisingly low, already prepared to slide behind the mountains and bring on the winter night.

He had only dated her for a month. She had flirted with him mildly for six months, always smiling and polite, never condescending. He had decided finally to ask her out when he sensed that she was attracted to him, that her jokes and banter were ways of extending their brief conversations when he made his weekly stop to service the office coffee station. He knew she'd been surprised at his request that Friday to meet her for a beer after work, too surprised to do anything but laugh and shake her finger and walk away. But then she had somehow managed to get his phone number and had called him and arranged a date, saying she didn't want any gossip around the office. She'd been that forward, and now she wouldn't even talk to him.

He tried to think of her arguments, what she'd said that last time, after their last dinner together.

"I'm almost as old as your mother."

"You're nothing like my mother. She doesn't know how to French kiss," he'd replied.

"It's not funny. I'll be going through menopause any time now. Maybe I am right now. Maybe that's why I'm acting crazy." She said this with tears in her eyes. "You don't even know what menopause is."

"I know what it is. And it doesn't matter. I'll help you through it."

"Oh God, you're so naive. You don't know what life does to you."

"I'm willing to find out."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Don't you see, when you're my age, I'll be an old woman. You'll want someone younger for sure. Even if we lasted that long." She shook her head slowly, looking right through him. "It just won't work."

That was the last time he saw her. She left his car and went into her house and closed the door and then let his phone messages pile up on her machine without answering even one. It was like his mother, leaving him; leaving him and never coming back.

Gene heard the low barking of a dog and turned to see a black mongrel go skittering out onto the ice in pursuit of a bright orange Frisbee. The dog looked like it had Lab in it and was old and shaggy-looking. What surprised Gene was that the person the dog returned the Frisbee to was not some similarly shaggy college student but a short, gray-haired woman. She took the disc from the dog and threw it again. As the dog took off, the woman walked on up the trail that went around the pond from the south side. She had a cane or a walking stick but still moved along at a brisk pace.

When the dog returned with the Frisbee after the second toss, the woman ignored it and the dog fell into place behind her, matching her pace. She marched along, the actions of her stick serving to speed her up in an unexpected way. When she came to a young, barren cottonwood, she took the stick and batted it about the lower branches as if checking the tree's sturdiness or maybe trying to shake something out. The dog sat down and looked expectantly up into the tree, the chewed-up Frisbee hanging in his mouth.

The woman moved on down the trail. When she was exactly opposite Gene, on the other side of the pond, she stopped again and seemed to be taking in the view of the mountains. The dog sat beside her and dropped the disc. The sun shone above her head and in the far-off distance you could see Long's Peak. She and the dog stood as still as icons. They might have been praying.

Watching her with her dog, Gene could not help thinking about Vicky, and he would have given anything for her to be there with him, to be able to say to her how lovely she would be in twenty years and how grateful he would be to still be with her. It came to him in a great surge, tears distorting his view while his throat constricted around a huge dry lump.

Gene leaned back against the top of the picnic table and drank the last of his soda. He knew he was feeling overly sentimental; he knew he should just get on with his life. The last swig of soda was warm and sickeningly sweet. He carefully replaced the cap and set

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the bottle on the bench beside him. He looked up at the blue sky, trying to enjoy the day, the extraordinary warmth, the clear sky, the sense that spring would, after all, eventually arrive. He knew he should be grateful for the day, but it was like a picture in a magazine and his senses were dead to all but a dull perception that he was in the picture.

He heard the jangle of chains and to his right he saw the black dog come trotting up the trail with the Frisbee in his mouth. The dog saw Gene and stopped uncertainly and looked back to where the old woman was emerging from the copse of small, barren cottonwood trees just up the trail. She was moving a little slower now, using the walking stick to probe the way ahead. When the dog appeared sure that she was coming, he resumed his trot, heading straight for Gene.

Gene expected the woman to say something to the dog, to call it back, but she seemed unconcerned. He wasn't really a dog person, so he was uncertain about what to do when the dog came within a few feet and dropped the Frisbee and looked at him. The Frisbee was faded and worn and had numerous tooth holes in it. Gene wouldn't have touched it if you'd paid him. The dog stared at him. It had gray in its muzzle and rheumy eyes.

"Nice old guy," he said. "Nice dog."

"Stewart is always in the mood to play," the woman said, close enough now for her strong voice to carry over the fifty yards. "I suppose that is one of the privileges of being a dog: You don't have to mature and in fact are a more pleasant companion if you retain your puppy qualities."

Gene nodded, trying to get a line on the way the woman spoke. It almost sounded foreign, it was so graceful and dignified. He saw the careful arrangement of her silver hair and nice coat and tasteful slacks and thought that her voice and diction matched her perfectly. She was beautiful, mature, and playful, all at the same time. Just the way Vicky would be when she was older—he just knew it.

"I guess it's a nice day to be a puppy," Gene said. It wasn't the way he felt, but it sounded right.

"Yes indeed. Stewart and I come here every day and this is indeed a 'good one,' " she said, not really looking at him. She stooped down gingerly, using the stick for support, and picked up the Frisbee. Steadying herself, she gave it a flip up the trail. The dog, Stewart, took out after it, nudging it along with his nose until he was able to get a purchase with his teeth and pick it up. Rather than re-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

turning it, he rambled on ahead. The woman continued on too, looking ahead at the dog or something beyond, perhaps the river.

Gene watched her move out of sight, back along the river toward the bridge. The feeling of loss compounded itself in him and he felt himself sinking lower and lower. It just wasn't fair. He felt only love and it brought him nothing but pain. It wasn't fair at all. He grabbed the bottle beside him and tried to take a drink. It somehow angered him to find that it was empty, as if someone else had drunk it. Suddenly furious, he threw the bottle high into the air, out over the pond. His arm wasn't very strong and the bottle didn't travel far, but still he expected it to break. It angered him more when it merely rang hollowly, bounced twice, and then spun on its side.

He almost ran out onto the pond, but knew the ice was too thin. Instead, he searched for some rocks. The soil was sandy and not frozen, but there were no throwing-size rocks readily visible. He dug about with the toe of his boot and managed to dislodge a few stones the size of a walnut. When he had accumulated nearly a dozen, he set them aside and carefully launched each one at the bottle. He threw as hard as he could, wanting each stone to be deadly and purposeful, to shatter the bottle into a thousand pieces. The shattering of the bottle was important and would prove something, would relieve him of his sorrow and pain. It made sense to him in a way that none of the rest of it did. His arm grew sore before he made it through the dozen rocks. None of his throws so much as threatened the bottle.

He started back home, walking with his head down, trying to imagine the embryos of spring flowers beneath the slimy, mucky mud along the trail. He let his shoes get covered with the brown mud as he continued down the middle of the trail right through the worst part, since he didn't want to damage any of those flower embryos. It was something like empathy for the flowers, as if he was another unbloomed, frozen thing, imprisoned in a cold place.

He was looking down like that when he saw the thing stuck in the cold ground. At first he thought it might be the tip of an arrow. It was pointed enough to have stuck into the ground, but it came out easily when he reached to retrieve it. He spun it around with his fingertips to see if he could tell what it was. It was gray with oxidation at the top, but was shiny and worn on the very tip. It had a round, cylindrical head with an opening that looked as if something had been inside, because it was not as tarnished as the rest of it. The other head of the cylinder had a spike on the end of it, long

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and square with a dull, rounded point. It was the tip of something all right, but it was too large to have been on an arrow. He put it in his pocket and continued on.

When he crossed the bridge again and came to the paved part of the trail, he stopped for a minute and used the pointed object to scrape the mud from his shoes. Up ahead, at the parking lot, he saw the woman letting the dog into the backseat of a small blue car. She walked carefully around to the other side, put the walking stick in ahead of her, got into the car herself, and then slowly drove away.

Watching her leave, Gene felt a great hopelessness, as if the old woman's leaving was symbolic of his never getting back together with Vicky. The hopelessness made his feet stick to the walkway and he had to drag himself toward home. At the door, he fumbled for his keys and came upon the object and suddenly realized what it was. It had to be the end to the woman's cane. That was what it had to be. And the fact that he had found it when he felt so low and that it came from the beautiful old woman made him realize that he shouldn't feel so gloomy. This had to be a sign of good luck. He took it as a symbol of hope and resolved that he would try one more time to convince Vicky. He fondled the small hard object and knew he would find a way.

He tried to be cagey about timing his call to her, so he could catch her when she might answer reflexively and not filter the call through her answering machine. He spent the night turning the light beside his bed on and off as he kept thinking of things to tell her, reaching for the message pad on his nightstand to record the thoughts. The minute he put pencil to paper, his thoughts lost their coherence. At five A.M. Gene got up, put on his sweats, and jogged up to the 7-Eleven for a coffee and an apple fritter.

The phone trembled in his hands when he finally decided to dial her number at six-fifteen. She would be getting up to let in her cat and take a shower and might be groggy enough to simply pick up and not think about it. Gene held the notebook in his hand. The flimsy pages trembled and he knew the coffee had been a bad idea. He punched the numbers, all but the last digit. He looked at what he had written and decided it was worthless, decided to let it go. Somehow his finger hit the seven anyway.

It rang only once before she answered in a wholly awake voice that startled him with its cheerfulness. He had expected to have the upper hand, catching her groggy and unalert, but it was he who listened to her say "Hello" three times before he even responded,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and then only to grunt out a "Vicky" which sounded as if he was trying to disguise his voice.

"Gene," she said quickly, amazing him with her instant recognition of his voice.

"I just wanted to see how you've been getting along," he said. "It's been so long since we've spoken."

"You know, I'm thinking about changing my phone number. I can't have you leaving all of those messages and tying up my machine."

"I only want to let you know that I'm thinking about you. There's nothing sinister about it. You don't need to change your phone number."

"Don't sound so pitiful."

"I'm not being pitiful." He knew he had to channel this in another direction. He was losing his edge. "Why do you care so little about how I feel? If I didn't care so much I wouldn't call. It doesn't really matter what you think of me. I'm only concerned about you."

"Don't try to make me feel bad about my decision, or I'll hang up."

"I'm not trying to make you feel bad. Why are you being so hard?" This had been a bad idea. Everything he said was the wrong thing. He wanted to be angry, but was too desperate to feel angry. "I only wanted to see how you were doing and tell you that I found that lost earring of yours. The jade one that you got from your daughter."

"You found it? I thought we turned your house inside out. Where was it?"

"It was stuck to a little flap of duct tape on the back of the nightstand. It fell off like we thought, but never made it to the floor. It got stuck on this tape."

Gene had totally forgotten about the earring until the moment he blurted out about finding it. He knew what the earring meant to her. He should have thought of it earlier. "I wanted to return it and see how you were."

She was silent for a moment and he knew it was no time to hesitate. "I know that you'd probably prefer I didn't bring it by your apartment. Would you mind if we met somewhere so I could give it to you? It wouldn't take but a second."

"Couldn't you just leave it at the office?"

"I could, but I'd really like to give it to you personally," he said, adding quietly, as if as an afterthought, "We could just meet at the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

park. You know, Martinez Park, down by the river." They had taken walks there before.

"I really don't think we should see each other again. I've said everything I want to say and there's no point in rehashing things. Why don't you just drop it off at the office. Leave it with Marie. She'll get it to me."

"Please, Vicky. I don't want to make a big thing out of this, but it'd be really nice if we could just meet and say hello, and I could give you your earring." Gene was prepared to say he wouldn't give it to her any other way, but that would be his last, desperate option. He didn't want her to know his desperation. He knew that was what frightened her.

"Okay, Gene. But I'm warning you: I'll only stay long enough to say hello and get the earring back. Not a second longer."

"Vicky, that's all I want. Nothing more."

And now she was walking toward him and Gene knew he should resist the urge to rush over and hug her and kiss her and show her how he felt. Instead, he calmly let her walk over to where he stood waiting on the hill above the playground. The October-like weather of the day before had been replaced by a quick-moving cold front. A thin layer of snow laced the entire area. It was in the thirties, but a brisk wind out of the northwest made it feel much colder.

She had on a pale blue hat of lambswool and matching scarf and mittens. Her hair, the blond of an Aspen tree's bark with the same silvery streaks, fluttered around her face. She stood without speaking, holding her mittened hands before her. Gene moved toward her, feeling tears leak from his eyes, wind-tears, but it wasn't the wind at all.

"Hi, Vick," he said, reaching his arms out to hug her. She stopped just short of him, his gesture dying as his arms slowly fell to his side. "You look great," he said as he noticed how she self-consciously avoided coming any closer. He sniffed and looked over his shoulder toward the path. "Would you mind a little walk?"

She had on her long coat and as the wind continued to whip around them, she crossed her arms and angled her head at him. "I know you don't intentionally try to deceive me, but that's just what you're doing." She shook her head, which still held that angle. "I really don't want to hurt your feelings, but I just don't think we have anything to talk about."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gene smiled, calculating that it would make him look sheepish. "Please. We'll just go a little way. There's something I want to show you."

"I need to get back to work. Would you just return my earring?"

Gene felt the end of the walking stick in his pocket and suddenly wished that he had arranged this all differently. He'd thought she would be more giving if they met face-to-face, but she still seemed to have totally abandoned him. If he could only touch her, maybe that would make the difference. He felt the urge in his hands and his arms, he wanted just to feel her body and he would have some relief, but he resisted.

"I'll give it to you if that's all you want, but I don't think that what I have to say will delay you too much. And there really is something I'd like for you to see. It might explain to you how I really feel."

She continued to hug herself, letting the wind buffet her about as if she were on the bobbing bow of a ship. She looked at him closely for the first time, and he caught a sense that she was hurting in some way. He suddenly knew that she wouldn't have agreed to come at all if she hadn't needed to see him. And she probably wanted to touch him, too. He moved to her and grabbed her hand, even as she pulled away.

"Come on. You're really going to appreciate this. I know you will."

Her struggle was meager, but Gene could feel her reluctance as he led her along the trail. The wind was directly in their faces now and they both kept their heads down. There was a stiffness in her hand and she did not return his grip. He knew that she might pull away at any moment. He said nothing until they came to the bridge.

"It's over by the pond," he said, lifting his wrist to see his watch and ascertain that it was about the right time. Her hand came up with his and after he glanced at the watch, he kissed her fingers through the mitten, and when he looked at her face, he saw a smile. He thought of a hundred things to say, but knew that none of them would sound right until he had shown her, until she realized what she meant to him.

The trail to the pond, sticky with mud the day before, was now frozen and covered with gritty patches of snow. The precariousness of the footing finally made her grab his hand firmly. As they came out of the trees along the river and into the open area around the pond, the sun abruptly flashed from behind one of the speeding clouds and its warmth momentarily neutralized the sting of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wind. He led her to the picnic table and they sat down. Gene looked around the pond, but did not see the old woman or her dog. She said she came every day, though: She should be by soon.

They still hadn't spoken. For Gene, her presence, still allowing him to hold her hand, was communication enough. They sat facing each other on the cold wooden slats. He compressed her hands between his.

"There was something, someone, I saw here yesterday that reminded me of you. It gave me such an overpowering feeling, that I just had to tell you about it." He heard the trembling in his voice, but could not control it. "But I knew you weren't really interested in talking to me and anyway, it was something you needed to see."

She turned her head and moved her lips to speak, but no words came out. A few more strands of her hair had come loose and were whipping against her cheek and down to the scarf on her throat. Gene wanted to brush the hair away from her skin, to tuck it away and then to kiss her cheek. He wanted to do this in such a strong way, but again he resisted. She would have to see first. He knew that somehow she was softening toward him, but he didn't want to take any chances.

"I wish you hadn't shut me off so completely," he said, sensing her nervousness. She had pulled her hand away and had brushed the hair from her face, as if she had known that he wanted to do it himself. "You don't know how much I miss you."

"I know that you miss me. Sometimes, I miss you too. But that doesn't change the fact that we're just too different, just too far apart." She smiled sadly when she said this and Gene saw how much she meant it.

"We're not really that far apart. Not in years. Not really."

"It's not just our ages."

The sun had gone behind the clouds again and Gene felt the cold eating away at his determination. He looked around but still did not see the old woman. Nothing would change unless Vicky met her. He had to show her and try to re-create for her what he had felt the day before. But maybe the old woman wouldn't show up. He didn't know how long he could wait.

"I can change the things you don't like about me. I can see why you think I'm immature. I know I'm sloppy and don't eat the right things and watch too much TV. I know these things, but I can change them. I care so much for you that I'm willing to do anything. I want you to know that. Anything."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She reached out and put her hands in his again. They looked like two puffy blue kittens curling up in hand. The wind-tears came into his eyes again.

". . . can't pretend that I can ignore those things you spoke about as well as the differences in our ages," she was saying. "I want you to be you and I want to be me. I want a nice calm life with someone I can rely on . . . to be there when I need him down the road."

"That's me, Vicky," he said, the tears in his voice now. "That's me."

"I wish it was," she said, "I really do."

"You don't understand," he suddenly shouted, standing up, banging his knee on the underside of the picnic table. He turned his back to her, to the wind, and scanned for the old woman again. The trees along the river rocked in the wind, their barren branches looking stiff and frigid and ready to break. The old woman had said that she came for a walk with her dog every day. Maybe the footing was too poor for her. Maybe she had lied.

Vicky stood up beside him. She had her arms wrapped around herself. "I'm getting cold, Gene. And I really need to get back to the office. Could you just let me have the earring? Let's not get all worked up over what we can't change."

Gene had forgotten about the earring. He had forgotten his story. He put his hand in his coat pocket as if the earring might magically be there. Instead, his fingers found the cold metal object, the end to the woman's cane, and he knew that it was all he had to show Vicky. The woman wasn't going to come, and his words were futile. This was his last chance.

"I wanted to introduce you to this woman, this old woman I saw yesterday. She reminded me of you." He had turned to face her. She had her back to the wind, to the pond, and loose strands of her hair were whipping around again. The wind bit at his chafed face. The change came over her face slowly, a hardening of the corners of her mouth that spread up her face, along her cheeks, and to the corners of her eyes, which suddenly glazed over, making him glance at the pond to see if it were now sheeted over with ice, too.

"How could some old woman remind you of me?" she asked in a frigid voice.

"It wasn't that she was old. That's not what I meant. It was this combination of things, this joy of life and this dignity."

"But she was old," Vicky said, and he knew how hard it was going to be to get her to see. "How old is old? I mean, to qualify as an old

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

woman did she seem to be sixty or seventy or ninety?" She paused and Gene knew just what she was going to say and he was already shaking his head. "Or was she my age?"

"No, no, no. You don't see. It's just the opposite of what you think. Just exactly the opposite." He still had his fingers on the thing. He wondered if he should show her. She was angry and defensive now. Anything might set her off. "She had this dog. I forget his name, but he carried around this Frisbee and she threw it for him and you should have heard her laugh."

"An old woman with an old dog who reminded you of me." Now she was shaking her head. "This is why we can't be together. You claim to be mature but if you were you wouldn't even mention such things. You wouldn't go to such pains to point them out. If you'll just give me my earring, I'll be going now."

"I don't have your earring," he said, louder than he intended. "I never had your earring. I just wanted to see you, to explain how I felt and somehow it just hasn't worked out like I planned."

Now she looked like the ice had totally penetrated her, had even become compressed into something harder and colder than ice, like coal pressed into a diamond. She stood before him like an ice-diamond, beautiful and colder than anything that had ever existed.

"On top of everything else, you lied," she said and he could barely understand her words, they were so tinny and high and frigid. She turned and started off.

"She had a walking stick, too," he said, although he knew she wouldn't hear even if she was listening. "She used it so gracefully, like it was just a part of her. I know that's how beautiful and graceful you would be and I only wanted to be beside you when it happened."

She was halfway to those barren cottonwoods along the river when he found that he was moving, too. And he had the end of the walking stick in his hand. He had it in his right hand and his arms were pumping as he took long strides in a jog, coming up on the back of her. When he got close enough, he reached out to stop her, reached out his right hand as if to tap her on the shoulder.

She let out a scream as the edge of the walking stick swished by her head, narrowly missing the whiteness at the back of her neck. He knew what would happen when the pointed object hit her, even as he raised his arm to bring it down again, this time too close to miss. It would not be blood, he knew that, there was no chance for it to be anything as warm and essential as blood. It would be something blue that came out, something blue and frigid that came from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a cold heart. Oddly, he missed her again, as she had fallen. He stood over her, the both of them breathing hard, jetting mists of exhausted life into the air.

"You don't deserve my love," was all he said. "I met someone yesterday and thought you would be as worthy, but I was wrong."

He was both kneeling and raising his arm to try again when he saw the dog, the handkerchief around its neck and the Frisbee in its mouth. The old woman was twenty yards back, coming up slowly, a strange grimace on her face. She looked as if she was saying something as she approached, but Gene could hear nothing but his own ragged breathing. He saw her step carefully around a particularly large snow-covered piece of the frozen trail, using the stick, but the bare wooden end of it slipped and he knew he should return the tip, he had it right here in his hand.

Gene tried to stand again, to offer her the end of the walking stick. He was still wondering why she had raised the stick when it cracked against his head, just above his ear. He continued to offer her the object as the blows moved to other parts of his body and he felt the teeth of the dog at his arm. He still thought this was just a simple misunderstanding, even as the stick caught him across the mouth and he tasted his own cold blood.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a *NEW* short story by

RUTH RENDELL

A master of all forms of suspense from the mystery short-short to complex detective novels, Ruth Rendell has two new books out this spring, No Night is Too Long, *under the pseudonym Barbara Vine, and* Simisola, *as Ruth Rendell, both from Harmony Books. . . .*

UNACCEPTABLE LEVELS

by RUTH RENDELL

"You shouldn't scratch it. You've made it bleed."

"It itches. It's giving me hell. You don't react to mosquito bites the way I do."

"It's just where the belt on your jeans rubs. I think I'd better put a plaster on it."

"They're in the bathroom cabinet," he said.

"I know where they are."

She removed the plaster from its plastic packaging and applied it to the small of his back. He reached for his cigarettes, put one in his mouth, and lit it.

"I wonder if you're allergic to mosquito bites," she said. "I mean, I wonder if you should be taking antihistamine when you get bitten. You know, you should try one of those sprays that ease the itching."

"They don't do any good."

"How do you know if you don't try? I don't suppose smoking helps. Oh, yes, I know that sounds ridiculous to you, but smoking does affect your general health. I bet you didn't tell the doctor you had all these allergies when you were examined for that life insurance you took out."

© 1994 by Kingsmarkham Enterprises.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What do you mean, 'all these allergies'? I don't have allergies. I have rather a strong reaction to mosquito bites."

"I bet you didn't tell them you smoked," she said.

"Of course I told them. You don't mess about when you're taking out a hundred thousand pounds' worth of insurance on your life." He lit a cigarette from the stub of the last one. "Why d'you think I pay such high premiums?"

"I bet you didn't tell them you smoke forty a day."

"I said I was afraid I was a heavy smoker."

"You ought to give it up," she said. "Mind you, I'd like a thousand pounds for every time I've said that. I'd like a *pound*. You smokers don't know what it's like living with it. You don't know how you smell, your clothes, your hands, the lot. It gets in the curtains. You may laugh, but it's no joke."

"I'm going to bed," he said.

In the morning she had a shower. She made a cup of tea and brought it up to him. He stayed in bed smoking while he drank his tea. Then he had a shower.

"And wash your hair," she said. "It stinks of smoke."

He came back into the bedroom with a towel round him. "The plaster came off."

"I expect it did. I'll put another one on."

She took another plaster out of its pack.

"Did I make it bleed?"

"Of course you make it bleed when you scratch it. Here, keep still."

"You'd think it would stop itching after a couple of days, wouldn't you?"

"I told you, you should have used an anti-allergenic spray. You should have taken an antihistamine. You've got a nasty sore place there and you're going to have to keep it covered for at least another forty-eight hours."

"Anything you say."

He lit a cigarette.

In the evening they ate their meal outdoors. It was very warm. He smoked to keep the mosquitoes away.

"Any excuse," she said.

"One of those little buggers has just bitten me in the armpit."

"Oh, for God's sake. Just don't scratch this one."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Do you really think I should have told the insurance people I'm allergic to mosquito bites?"

"I don't suppose it matters," she said. "I mean, how could anyone tell after you were dead?"

"Thanks very much," he said.

"Oh, don't be silly. You're much more likely to die of smoking than of a mosquito bite."

Before they went to bed she renewed the plaster on his back and, because he had scratched the new one, gave him another. He could put that one on himself.

He had to get up in the night, the bites drove him mad and he couldn't just lie there. He walked about the house, smoking. In the morning he told her he didn't feel well.

"I don't suppose you do if you didn't get any sleep."

"I found a packet of nicotine patches in the kitchen," he said. "Nicotend or something. I suppose that's your latest ploy to stop me smoking."

She said nothing for a moment. Then, "Are you going to give it a go then?"

"No, thanks very much. You've wasted your money. D'you know what it says in the instructions? 'While using the patches it is highly dangerous to smoke.' How about that?"

"Well, of course it is."

"Why is it?"

"You could have a heart attack. It would put unacceptable levels of nicotine into your blood."

"Unacceptable levels—you sound like a health minister on telly."

"The idea," she said, "is to stop smoking while using the patch. That's the point. The patch gives you enough nicotine to satisfy the craving *without* smoking."

"It wouldn't give me enough."

"No, I bet it wouldn't," she said, and she smiled.

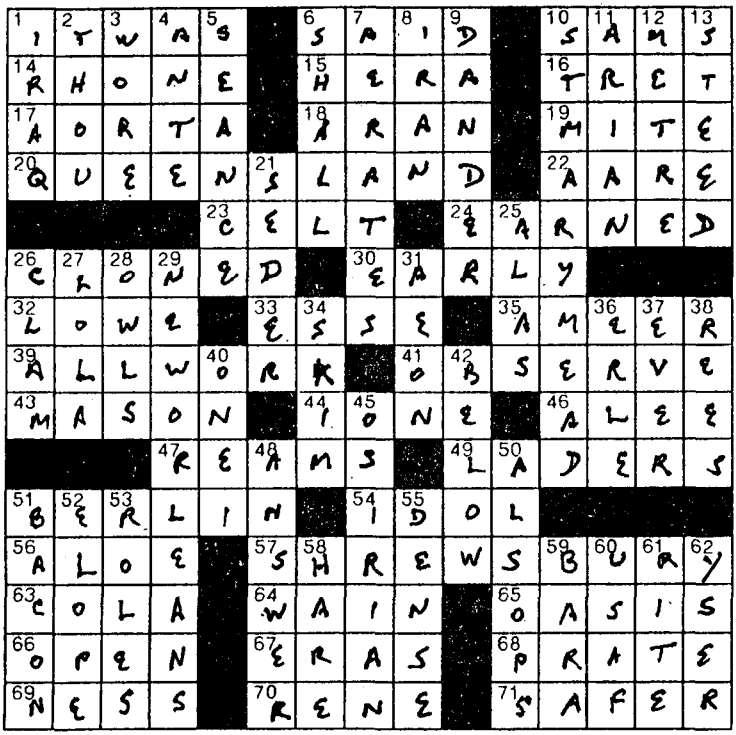
He lit a cigarette. "I'm going to have my shower and then perhaps you'll redo those plasters for me."

"Of course I will," she said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

By Beth Allison



Solution on page 284

CRIME SCENES

ACROSS

1. "—— a dark and stormy . . ."
6. " 'I,' —— the sparrow 'with my little arrow' "
10. Spade and others
14. Swiss-French river
15. Wife to Zeus
16. Waste allowance
17. Main artery
18. Island group off Ireland
19. Widow's ——
20. Arthur Upfield's Detective Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte's territory
22. Bern's river

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

23. Scot, e.g.
24. Merited
26. Copied
30. Kind of bird
32. Actor Rob
33. Being
35. Arabian chieftain
39. —— and no play
41. Notice
43. Creation of 36 down
44. She lived in "The Last Days of Pompeii"
46. Sheltered
47. Quantities of paper
49. Dock workers
51. —— *Game,* Len Deighton
54. Adored image
56. Bitter herb
57. Where Ellis Peters's Brother Cadfael detects
63. Soft drink
64. Farm cart
65. Refuge
66. —— Sesame!
67. Periods
68. Babble
69. Capone's nemesis
70. French Statesman Coty
71. More secure

DOWN

1. Neighbor of 8 Down
2. Older you
3. Donned
4. Feed the kitty
5. —— *on a Wet Afternoon,* Mark McShane
6. "—— I compare thee to a summer's day," Shakespeare
7. Treats with gas
8. Formerly Persia
9. Temper
10. Agatha Christie's Miss Marple's village
11. 4th c. heretic
12. Unit of measurement (Brit.)
13. Hero in "The Avengers"
21. Passover ceremonial dinner
25. —— and alack
26. Silent one
27. "Damn Yankees" siren
28. Nocturnal birds
29. Julie Smith's Skip Langdon's turf
31. Ages
34. Glide
36. First name in mystery
37. *If Death —— Slept,* Rex Stout
38. Caddoan Indians
40. "The —— Love," 1924 song
42. Beneath
45. Pertaining to the Egyptian god of death
48. —— *Came There None,* E. X. Ferrars
50. Columnists Joseph and Stewart
51. Bring home the ——
52. Flee
53. Actors' desires
55. Crowded
58. Loser in the race
59. Negri's colleague
60. Amer. Mil. group
61. *The Wrong ——,* Charlotte MacLeod
62. River flowing from Belgium into the North Sea

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a *NEW* short story by

TERRY MULLINS

One of the delights of reading an historical mystery is the probability of coming across some tidbit of information one did not know before. And of course it's not only the reader who may discover something new. Terry Mullins tells us: "Before writing 'Mandeville and the Staple' I had not realized the full importance of wool in English history. I knew about the famous woolsack on which the Lord Chancellor sits when the House of Lords is in session, but it was largely a curiosity to me. In fact, it symbolizes the part wool played in making England a world power. That woolsack has sat beside the throne since before the time of Henry VIII." Mr. Mullins's sleuth, Sir John Mandeville, is based on an historical figure . . .

MANDEVILLE AND THE STAPLE

by TERRY MULLINS

For several centuries before the Renaissance, an organization of large wool merchants controlled the sale of wool from England to the Continent through The Staple. They shaped the commercial destiny of Western Europe through this monopoly.

A while after giving up his wanderings over the globe and settling down in the quiet town of Liege to write, Sir John Mandeville heard that the merchants of The Staple were threatened with destruction of their trade. As a member of the Fellowship of The Staple, Sir John felt compelled to go to their aid.

He left Liege two weeks before Lent was over and he planned to stay until after Easter. The Bishop of Liege had become somewhat too zealous in encouraging the good citizens of Liege to fast, and Sir

© *1995 by Terry Mullins.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

John's landlord (and taverner) was responding with inexplicable devotion. Since Sir John liked meat and drink almost as much as he liked a good audience for his stories, he viewed the encroaching saintliness with disfavor. The Bishop of Calais was, as he well knew, more broadminded about such things.

He found the merchants of The Staple terrified and confused. Jorge Stonor, the hearty, honest man in charge of The Staple, seemed at his wits' end.

"We have had a time of it, Sir John," he said. "We have really had a time of it. It's an even chance whether we'll have to move The Staple back to England."

"Tell me about it, Jorge. I've only heard rumors, some of them pretty wild."

"We get the wool over from England all right. It's here in Calais the mischief begins. There's been wool burnt and seals broken and even a customs officer of the English Crown beaten. The Crown demands that we protect its officers as well as our own members—which we would, we would, if we had any idea who's behind it all. If we was in England, where wool lost by one man could easily be replaced from another source, I'd suspect the Lombards, but they wouldn't damage wool here, not when they're buying and scarce wool will drive the price up. No, I can't fix the blame at all."

"Any new people around?"

"Not in The Staple. 'Course, there's new people all the time 'prenticed to the wool merchants and there's more small merchants all the time. Two new ones came with the fleet last crossing, but they's as scart as the rest of us. It's a near thing, Sir John, a near thing. If The Staple's damaged, all England's damaged. The Crown depends on us for its customs revenue, not to mention borrowing from merchants when it's short of deniers, which is most always.

"Trouble for The Staple is danger for all England. Money for ships and soldiers comes from us. It ain't easy to fight England's troops, not after Crécy and Poitiers, nor to get at the king. But it's easy as pie to hide and damage The Staple. And that counts as good as winning in fair battle."

"You could always go to Bruges."

"What good would that do? They would just follow us."

"Or go with you. Yes, I agree that Bruges or Antwerp wouldn't help you none. Since The Staple is in the dark, I'd like to talk with some of the smaller merchants."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jorge seemed relieved. Just the presence of Sir John was comforting, but having him take part was downright encouraging. "Here's a list of the hosts where we put up the merchants who don't own homes. We have three of the small merchants with Clark Torney."

He seemed about to go through the whole list, but Sir John broke in, "That sounds fine. If there's room at Clark Torney's I'd like to stay there and get to know the three who lodge there."

Jorge was delighted, poured Sir John some more beer, and gave him directions for reaching Clark Torney's house.

Sir John went first to see the governor of Calais, Sir Peter Courtenay, Knight of the Garter and a gallant but impetuous fighter. He welcomed Sir John and promised to see justice done if the culprits were caught, but he made it clear that the royal troops were for military action and The Staple would have to do its own police work. They talked for some time and made some plans.

That evening Sir John dined at the high table with his host and was glad to see that the three small merchants staying there had not been relegated to side tables but were beside him. They were young men, earnest and intent, but somewhat lacking in assurance. Richard Buckley of Broadway had made three trips to Calais and knew his way around. Elward Philpot and Bill Stace, both of Northleach, had made their first crossing. All three were in awe of the great traveler who had journeyed through Cathay on camelback, had walked the Land of Promissin, and had talked with Saracen, Turk, and paynim in their own tongues.

"Do any of you have 'prentices?" Sir John asked.

They laughed. "That's too high for us," Bill Stace replied. "Ned and I have a man watching our fells with a musket and Dick here hired a local man to keep an eye on his until all is sold, but we do the business ourselves. Frederick Elthan has two 'prentices working for him, big louts but crafty. And Charles Swynford has three, but they didn't save him from having six fells stole and a bale of wool burnt."

This was the sort of thing Sir John wanted. "When did all this start?" he asked.

"It's been going on for a couple of weeks, since two days after we landed. Lewis Tyburn had five sarplers cut into and the seals broke. Canvas where the wool was packed was slashed and bales throwed into the water. So most of us took precautions, but soon fire was set to the shed where Robert Picard had his wool stored. He's a big merchant and he'd've lost all he had if his man hadn't smelled sump-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tin and raised a crew to put it out. Since then, every night it's been sumptin and the customs officer was beat, too. Now there's talk about moving The Staple out of Calais."

"Who's been hurt the most?"

"So far it's been Tyburn and Picard that's suffered the most loss."

"And who hasn't been hit yet?"

"None of the small merchants has been hurt. A couple of them is sleeping on their wool all night to protect it. Among the important merchants, Frederick Elthan of Lambeton hasn't been bothered, but he's worried. I seen him today and I can tell you, he's worried."

Before Sir John could continue the conversation, the meal arrived and Clark Torney himself pronounced the blessing. Sir John was delighted to see that it was English fare with nothing of Lent about it. There were puddings, an enormous goose, pastries, and plain beans of several sorts. The meal was served by two elderly male servants whom Sir John supposed to be French, though they never said a word.

They were commanded by Dame Torney, a large woman who sat at her husband's right, spoke only to the servants but never looked at them, and whose eyes missed nothing. She was the only person at the table who seemed unimpressed by Sir John, and he mistrusted her greatly.

The great traveler was expected to entertain the feast with one of his marvelous stories, and some quirk of perversity led him to tell of the isles of Colcos and Lango whose lord, Yporcas, had a daughter who looked remarkably like an enormous dragon and lived in an old castle in a cave from which she emerged only twice or thrice a year. If any man were to have the courage to kiss her on the mouth, she would become fair and comely and he would become lord of the kingdom. So far as Sir John knew, several had died in the attempt, and none had succeeded.

The men of the company enjoyed the tale, but Dame Torney received it coldly.

As usual, they drank sparingly of the wine, but after the meal the men remained for ginger cakes and beer. Sir John intended to secure the help of the three young wool merchants to put an end to the menace to The Staple, but first he needed to take the measure of his potential allies and to learn more about circumstances. He approached his task with admirable indirection.

"Have any of you heard of Engelbert of Admont?"

None had.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He was a writer and thinker of a generation or so before yours. He held that sufficiency, tranquility, and security are the necessary conditions for a prosperous state. I think there is much to be said for his position."

The men agreed. Torney called for more beer and the young men waited for Sir John to continue. He waited for the beer, dealt with it, and resumed.

"Now the wool trade is providing sufficiency for England, and the strength of The Staple has provided a certain amount of tranquility and security as well. The recent Treaty of Bretigny bids fair to give us the sort of peace which may continue the prosperity of the state. But if The Staple is destroyed, or seriously damaged, all of this will be undone. Much as you small merchants dislike or envy The Staple, you know that the bulk of revenue for governing England comes from Staple customs payments on wool, leather, and tin. We cannot do without it."

Clark Torney voiced his hearty agreement. Even the young men, who as small wool merchants were not part of The Staple and who tended to resent its power, were swayed by Sir John's logic. Buckley suggested that Spaniards were behind the attack on The Staple. No one agreed with him.

"Spanish wool and English wool don't compete," Philpot said. "Theirs is next-best wool and can't be used alone by any of the weavers of Ghent or Michlin. Except it be mixed with English wool, it is useless. So without English wool, Spanish wool would have no market for its product."

Sir John thought it time to come to the point. "Are you planning to check on your wool tonight?" he asked.

"Yes. We usually go an hour or two after supper, but it ain't easy getting around a strange town in the dark."

"Do you go armed?"

"Each of us has a musket."

Sir John frowned. "That's all?"

"That's all."

"I don't like firearms," Sir John said. "There's no telling who's going to get shot. I thought I might come with you tonight, but not if you are using muskets."

Eager to have Sir John's help, Bill Stace said, "We wouldn't need to take them if you didn't want." He looked at his fellow merchants, who nodded agreement.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Good," said Sir John. "Arm yourself with daggers or clubs. I have my sword. We'll set out at your usual time, and when you've secured your property, we'll go after the vandals at a place where I think we can find them."

The ginger cakes were gone, so they drank a final round of beer and then set off for their rooms to prepare for the night's adventure.

Sir John came down dressed for the work of the night. He found the young merchants dressed as if they were going to a fair. They all wore their best boots, so tightly laced as to make walking elegant and running impossible. Buckley actually wore a Flemish beaver hat. Philpot and Stace also wore fresh clothes which looked as if they had been newly bought from some booth at a Flemish fair. All three wore gloves, and Buckley had lace on his cuffs.

"Do you realize," Sir John asked, "that it's so damned dark out there that no one will be able to see you?"

They missed the point entirely and Philpot replied, "Of course. The moon has been dying for four days past half moon and there's a beastly fog from the sea, but we can find our way. Don't worry."

Sir John shrugged. It was clear that any walk through a strange town was an occasion for these young men and they dressed for it regardless. He hoped they did not underestimate the seriousness of their undertaking. Ruffians who attack storehouses, steal bales of wool, set fire to buildings, and assault customs officers were not likely to respect the persons of honest wool merchants met in dark and deserted streets at night.

Clark Torney saw them off and promised that his servant would be on hand to readmit them when they returned. "This reminds me," he reminisced, "of the days when King Edward brought his army to Calais. Another writer stayed with me then, a young poet named Geoff Chaucer, who was in the service of Prince Lionel. He used to slip through Calais at night and go across the Channel and back with secret dispatches. The French caught him and Prince Lionel had to pay his ransom. I showed him a copy of your *Travels* and he was much impressed."

Sir John paused going out the door and said, "That's the first you've mentioned it. You must tell me more when we have time. For now there is dire business ahead and I must deal with it promptly."

And so he left the candlelit house of Clark Torney and plunged into the Stygian blackness of a fog-wrapped Calais.

He and Buckley went together, followed by the Northleach merchants. Sir John found Buckley of Broadway a mixed bag of goods.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The young man had nothing of the sea about him except a rough reddish sunburn which might have been acquired in any outdoor occupation. His walk was a long stride without the sailor's roll to it, and his hands, though strong enough, lacked the heavy calluses of a seaman. He had a broad plain face which suggested honesty without guaranteeing it. He stood a head taller than his Northleach companions.

They, in turn, had the half-sea, half-soil look which marked most of the English in Calais, whether they were wool merchants or clerks. The Treaty of Calais in 1359 had filled the city with hundreds of such hearty tradesmen. Sir John felt a comfortable superiority in such company and assumed a leadership which they never questioned.

They made their way first to the small warehouse where Buckley's wool was stored. The guard was asleep and when Buckley shook him to wake him up, the fellow thought he was being attacked and tried to flee. However, all was well and they left the place more safely guarded than they found it.

So off they went, the tall young man now following the shorter two and Sir John a cautious fourth. He wanted to see how well the young men knew Calais. They had got to the first warehouse quite directly. The second was not far, and there they found the guard awake and prepared to shoot them. On finding out who they were, he seemed glad for company and the five of them talked awhile in the dark. As they talked, a land breeze sprang up and the sky cleared. A crescent moon hung almost overhead and gave enough light to show the shapes of buildings but not enough to throw a shadow.

"And now we must go to Frederick Elthan's warehouses," Sir John said.

"Why?"

"Because we have to scotch those vandals. It will do little good for you to save this shipment of wool if you never make another. These attacks could drive The Staple out of Calais; and that could drive England from the Continent. A few large merchants form the main support of The Staple and Elthan is one of the most important."

"Why Elthan in particular?"

"Because of something you all told me at supper. Come now, his warehouses are a way off and I want to get there before they are damaged."

Philpot and Stace were willing enough, but Buckley was not enthusiastic. Since seeing to his own goods, he had lost all sense of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

urgency. He was, Sir John realized, a loner who was not sure enough of himself to go it alone. He finally went with Sir John because the others did.

From there on Sir John had to lead the way. Sensing that he had a captive audience, he described some of his early adventures. "I was only thirteen when I first came to Calais," he said. "A local wool merchant had just bought all of our May clipping. (We always sold to merchants, never to broggers.) And I talked my father into letting me go with the merchant as a 'prentice. I earned and learned, for the man kept me busy helping at whatever task needed an extra pair of hands. We sailed from Hull and halfway across were attacked by Scottish pirates. We held them off with a small cannon and our bows. Once when the others were busy breaking out the darts, I got to fire the cannon, but they never let me load it. That, they said, took skill. When the pirates saw we were well armed, they steered off and we never saw them again."

For a while they talked about pirates and storms, of ships lost, men lost, and worst of all, whole cargoes of wool lost.

They were less than a quarter of a mile from Elthan's houses when they heard cries for help. Brandishing their clubs, the three young men rushed forward. They heard sounds of a small but furious scuffle and, as they reached the scene, they saw a torch being lit.

Two ruffians were assaulting the guard while a third man was waving his newly lit pine torch to get it to burn more vigorously. His intention was obvious. He was just waiting for the other two to dispose of the guard and he was going to set fire to the building.

The attackers heard Sir John's party and turned to face them. A vicious but unskilled brawl ensued. Stace struck the firebrand from the first man's hand and dealt him a solid blow on the ear before the man seized a small timber and counterattacked. The others were evenly matched, clubs against clubs. Sir John observed that Buckley was mainly concerned to counter the blows of his opponent, and as a result received several blows to his arm and shoulder. The two from Northleach were driving fiercely forward, backing their adversaries down the street. Sir John drew his sword, and when the vandals saw the glint of moonlight on steel, they dropped their clubs and fled.

Sir John stamped out the burning slivers and helped the warehouse guard to his feet.

"You was just in time," the guard said. "In another few minutes they would've killed me and burnt the house."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sir John turned to his friends. "What damage did you do?" he asked.

"Mine will have a fat ear tomorrow," Stace replied.

"And mine a knot on his noggin," Philpot added.

"Good," said Sir John. "Let us remember that. Now I think we can return to our lodging."

Doubtless his words stirred some curiosity in the three wool merchants, but he gave them no opportunity to question him, for he talked all the way back.

On rising at noon the next day, Sir John found that the story of the night's encounter had spread throughout the house and beyond. Without being at all modest about their own exploits, his companions had made him the hero even though he hadn't struck a blow. Partly this was because of the magical effect his sword had on the enemy, but mostly it was because he had been their general. They recognized him as the brains of the affair. The household greeted him with a cheer.

"Sir Peter has summoned all the wool merchants into his presence," Torney told him. "Since you are a member of the Fellowship of The Staple, I guess you'd better go too."

"And so I shall. It was largely at my insistence that the gathering was called. Sir Peter Courtenay and I plan to solve the mystery of who is behind this attempt to undermine The Staple."

"For all your traveling, you are still English," Torney commented. "The Irish create mysteries. The Germans wallow in mysteries. And the Danes hate mysteries. But only the English insist on solving mysteries. Well, good luck to you."

The wool merchants were assembled in the governor's hall with Sir Peter himself presiding. The Fellowship of The Staple was foremost, with a crowd of smaller merchants crowded at the rear.

Sir Peter, an impetuous man at all times, moved things along at a fast pace and soon had complete reports from all the merchants who had sustained damage. Then he called on Buckley, Philpot, and Stace to tell what had happened the night before.

"Did you get a good look at the vandals?" he asked each of them. They had, but they did not know who they were. They were dismissed and worked their way back among their fellow small merchants.

Sir Peter turned abruptly and said, "Well, Sir John?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sir John was beside the governor and now moved forward. "I saw them, too, and I had never seen them before. But I have seen them recently. They are in this hall!"

There was a commotion and the governor's men seized three persons who tried to flee. The three 'prentices of Charles Swynford were dragged forward. One had a swollen and badly damaged ear. Another had a bandage about his head. The third had one hand bandaged.

Sir John explained. "Charles Swynford was among the first to report losses, but he suffered little. He claimed six fells stolen. I think they may turn up when you inspect his goods. And he had a bale of wool burnt. One bale of wool! Why would vandals burn one bale of wool when they could have burned the warehouse down? He burned it himself, of course, to throw off suspicion. And he probably has all the wool stolen from the others. He meant to drive up the price by destroying his competitors, and he might have succeeded if you hadn't acted promptly."

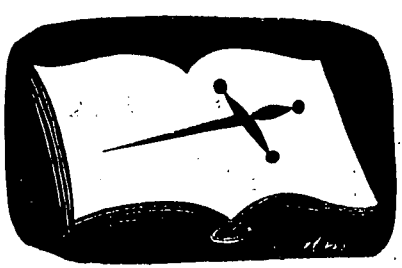
"I've a mind to treat Charles Swynford as King Edward wanted to treat the six burghers of Calais!" an enraged Sir Peter roared.

"His head wouldn't be worth much to you," Sir John replied. "But his goods would. Why not declare all his goods forfeit to the Crown and send him back to England a beggar. That would be the worst penalty you could give a greedy merchant."

"Done!"

The governor invited Sir John to dine that evening, but knowing that Sir Peter was a man to go to extremes, the great traveler begged off until after Lent.

"I wish to find out more from my host Clark Torney about a certain poet he met during negotiations for the Treaty," he explained.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jere Hoar has worn many hats in his working life: editor, reporter, part-time lawyer, and teacher. The events of 1994 entitle him to wear one more: fiction writer. It was shortly after Mr. Hoar's unpublished novel was named a finalist in the 1994 Hemingway First Novel Contest that he received the news that EQMM *had accepted "Prey Don't Tell." We welcome the author, who hails from Oxford, Mississippi, to the ranks of* EQMM *firsts . . .*

PREY DON'T TELL

by JERE HOAR

Charlie smells like musk perfume. He wears a green or maroon jacket with wide lapels, black pants with two-inch cuffs, black shoes with sponge soles, and an open-collar shirt that stands tall in back. The flat gold chain around his neck gets buried in gray hair that curls in the V of his collar. A college ring with a blue stone weights the third finger of his right hand. On the left hand is a band set with diamonds—not chips. He doesn't need knucks. He doesn't need a gun. Charlie is strong. "Just let some guy smart-mouth me," he says. "Just let them!"

I'm a keeper at the zoo, Jack Leonard by name, Jack L. by nickname. Smart guys say it like "jackal." I got a limp and I'm ugly. Now that Kally has left, I got Charlie for a friend. The lioness I'm in charge of don't like me at all. Or if she does, she likes me the way she likes any cripple' thing. She sees the hitch in my hip and says, *Uh-huh! Just you wait, cripple man. Just you wait!*

In Birmingham she clawed a keeper. They'd've put her down but she's so pretty, we offered a trade. Got this fur on her neck like a lady's cape. Got a walk about her, and a talk about her. When I

© *1995 by Jere Hoar.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

throw her meat chunks she chuckle down deep. *Thank you, cripple man,* she say.

Some evenings after work when Charlie ain't hurrying home to the good supper Kally cooked for him, or got a ball game to watch on his big TV, him and me sit outside the cat house and drink us some beer. "A twilight respite," Charlie calls it.

Charlie explains things to me. His eyes hide deep in his face, like in caves, and sparkle out little and bright. Charlie's maybe the smartest man I know, and the quickest. A man that crosses Charlie will have cause to wish he hadn't.

Drinking on the grounds is against all rules, but we carry our beer in a paper sack to show the night guards some respect. They make a wide circle around Charlie. One that joked about seeing Charlie drink beer got fired for sleeping on duty and carelessness with a firearm. None of the rest of them want to see the grounds boss drink beer.

Charlie and me don't call attention to ourselves. Just once we did. Charlie got the notion our oldest lion, Leo, needed some fresh meat. I took Leo on a chain to Monkey Island and let him look at them hanging in trees, screaming. I knew he wouldn't cross the moat to get him one. He's so old and spoiled he expects me to feed him.

When Leo came padding out of his cage, roaring loud enough to deafen a man, everything in the zoo screamed or barked or yowled or brayed. Leo showed his yellow snags and looked at Charlie. Charlie don't like to be in the thin center of a lion's eye. Leo made a little jump at him, but I got the chain and Leo ain't gonna do nothing. He ain't got it in him. But what does Charlie do? He runs.

I yell after Charlie, "Come back, Shane! Come back!"

Charlie comes back, draws himself up, and says, "Well, Jack L., I can retrieve my beer can, but I don't think I can retrieve my dignity."

I say, "How'd you move that fast, Charlie? I never saw a stout man run so fast."

"Let it alone."

I giggle.

"Okay, wise guy. What would you do if a lion came after you, and you didn't have a weapon?"

"I'd order it to its cage."

"Suppose that didn't work."

"I could run pretty fast if I had to."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Charlie says patiently, "No you couldn't. One of your legs is two inches shorter than the other."

I showed Charlie and Leo my Reeboks. "These are magic shoes. I been practicing."

"I can beat you in a fifty-meter dash, even with *this.*" Charlie pats the roll hanging over his belt.

"You named that thing?"

Charlie's face gets hard like a rock. "Put that cat up. I'm going home and see what Kally fixed me for dinner."

"Stay awhile, Charlie. I got another six-pack."

"Get a life, why don't you?"

That night I ate two peanut butter sandwiches with sour pickles while I watched a nature program about wolves. When there is not a nature program on TV, I watch my tapes. I've bought all the predator tapes. I got a life. There's nothing better than living with predators, except maybe living with Kally.

"Jeez!" Charlie says the next time we meet for a drink. His lips tighten and he lifts his nose. "You smell like cat piss, man. You *bathe* in it?"

"No, I'm real careful, Charlie. I don't want to get any on me. Cat piss must hop on me from what cats have pissed on. It jumps like ticks do. That's what I figure."

"Where'd you acquire that idea?"

"I don't know. I just thought it up."

"Jeez! I don't know why I put up with you. You're nasty. You're inhuman."

"Kally didn't think I was," I say. My voice sounds whiny.

"Aw, kid, Kally felt *sorry* for you. You know how it is when you get some poor crippled dog out of the pound, and you want to feed it and make it normal?"

"Kally liked me. I know she did."

"How could a woman stand a man that smells like cat piss?"

"You don't have to talk to me like that, Charlie. It's all right that you took Kally. I'm glad for her to live in your good house. I don't have nothing like that for her."

Charlie wipes the air with his hand and turns his face away.

"Here, have some beer. It's imported, Charlie. I was working late and didn't have time to wash like I should. I'll sit downwind."

Charlie reaches out a hand to feel the temperature of a bottle in the paper sack. Everything's all right then, because this is the Bass Pale Ale Charlie likes. He slips one out of the sack, fumbles in his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

coat pocket, and asks, as always, "You got the key?"

"Charlie, does Kally ever—you know, ax you about me? How I'm doing and all?"

"Naw." He gurgles the beer I've opened. "Kally don't *ax* me nothing. Do not say *ax* ever again to me."

"How is she?"

He shrugs.

"You used to brag on her. You used to tell me things she said."

Charlie rubs his jaw. He hums "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." He gives me a sweet, sweet smile. "Will you shut up about Kally? Will you just *shut up?*"

"Charlie—" The whine that I don't want in my voice has come. "Just one more thing. Does she *ask* about Duchess?"

"Naw."

"That sounds wrong. Are you sure?"

"She doesn't, I'm telling you."

I shake my head.

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"I don't know . . . Yeah, Charlie, I'm calling you a liar. You're *lying*, Charlie. You're *lying.*" I've doubled up my fists. I'm thinking about all the people I know who work big cats. We know cats better than people, and care about them every bit as much.

Charlie turns on the bench and pokes his red face toward mine. His yellowish eyes bulge. Every word sounds like a hammer tap. "She—ain't—ever—coming—back. Get Kally out of your stupid head."

"Why, Charlie, why?" I can't seem to stop my whine.

Charlie's words snap like whip cracks. " 'Cause I kicked her narrow ass out. She's gone. She got on the bus and left town. Took her brown suitcase and that hanging bag. We broke up. We split the blanket."

"Oh."

"So that's that."

"I guess."

"No more Kally. I don't have to listen to you carry on about Kally. Right?"

"I guess so." Something hurt in my chest. My throat felt tight and dry. My eyes wanted to run. I didn't have any taste for icy, imported beer. "—I guess that's right."

Charlie drank the six-pack of Bass alone.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For a while after I found out Kally was gone for good, nothing seemed to matter to me. I just went through the motions of being a keeper. Charlie tried to help. "Jeez!" he'd say. "Stand up straight. You look like your damn back is broke. What do you care about that whore?"

"Kally wasn't a whore."

"Sure she was. Didn't I buy her off of you?"

"You never."

"Sure I bought her."

"She wouldn't do that." I was shaking my face back and forth, hard. My cheeks and nose were swaying on my face bones. "I want you to take that back."

"Take it easy, kid. You're right, in a manner of speaking. A man couldn't buy her for twenty bucks, nor forty either."

"Not a hundred! She worked, hard work, in the cat house taking care of tigers."

Charlie smiled. "Okay, she worked in a cat house and wouldn't lay down for a hundred. But she *could* be bought, Jack L. She went for the intangibles. Offer Kally intangibles and she'd open her legs." His voice rose to falsetto. "She'd say, 'Take me, take me.' "

"Bull! What's intangibles?"

"Stuff you can't even see. Good will . . . hot air. I gave her the words she wanted to hear . . . pictures made up out of air. I bought her for puffery. I said, 'Come live with me, Kally. I can't live without you.' That's what she wanted to hear. Coin of the realm with women." Charlie slapped his leg and grinned like we were equals.

"You told her you loved her. She told me you did."

Charlie wiped his hand through the air like a bear slapping bees. "Ah, you dope. If a man wants to get in a woman's pants the first thing he says is 'I love you.' Maybe he *does* love her while he's in heat. Or maybe he thinks he's in love because she's all he thinks about at first."

"You asked her to live with you," I argued. "You must have felt something."

"That's the peanut you give a monkey to do its trick. See, if a guy my age wants a young woman regular, it's what I have to pay. It's what I buy her with. *Now* do you get it?"

"You mean you lied? I get it, Charlie. I get it real good."

He wipes his hand through the air again, then brings it down and rubs his nose. "Did I ever lie to you? I lie to people who hold their hands out asking for it, begging for it. I lie to the ones who say

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

'Give me the words I want to hear. I don't care whether they are true or not.' "

"It was wrong. It was wrong to bait Kally off her job and then throw her away when you was done with her."

Charlie sighs. "Nah, kid. It was *right*. That explains why I'm a supervisor and you shovel cat shit. I see the world as it is. You live in a dream world where the Blind Lady's scales tilt in favor of the dummies. That makes you as stupid as Kally."

What happened between Kally and Charlie I don't know, and may never know, but something did. Something soured Charlie. After he told me she was gone he hated female things. We sat on the bench at the lion habitat more than before. He had time for it. But Charlie stared at the Duchess with squinty, mean eyes.

"The zoo ought to get shut of that cat. She's a fugging menace," Charlie says. "You can't trust a female. Why do you come out here every night?"

"That beauty is very fussy. If I don't take care of her she will starve down to a moth-eat rug. Somebody got to do what's right for her."

"You're a natural fool," Charlie says. "Leo, he's steady and lazy. You can predict what a male will do. With Duchess you'll find you're a half-step slow."

I drink my beer and grin and belch.

"She hates me," he says bitterly.

"She loves me. Every time I go inside she takes the measure of my meatiest bones."

"You can't trust a bitch." Charlie has drunk many beers. His voice catches. "They'll step out on you."

Across the moat, in the habitat, Duchess walks back and forth, back and forth. She yellow-eyes us like we're impala on the Kalahari.

So I had to know what happened to Kally. I took a vacation day. While Charlie was working I went to his house.

It's a white frame house in a middle-class neighborhood. Paint peels on it, and tall yellow grass stands in the yard. I went around back and looked in the kitchen window. Dirty dishes were piled on the table. Some stuff he'd thrown at the garbage can had missed it.

I popped the lock on the window with a short crowbar I'd carried inside my pants, along my upper thigh. Then I scrambled in.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The kitchen furniture was yellow Formica with rusty chrome legs. Leading off the kitchen was the den. It opened on a bedroom to the left and a bedroom to the right. Straight ahead was the living room. All the furniture was shiny oak. The couch was blue and puffy. The TV was a twenty-five-inch Motorola. The unmade bed in the big bedroom had controls like the power console on a car. I smelled the pillows. They didn't smell like Kally. In a basket under the dresser in the bedroom was a six-month-old newspaper, seven ear swabs, and a cologne bottle with a label that said "Joop." I opened it and lifted the stopper. The Saturday-night smell of it brought back Kally . . . her teasing and her playfulness and her smile. I pulled open the dresser drawer. The sight and smell made me close my eyes, weak in the knees. I picked up the boxes, the little brushes and lipsticks. I screwed the lipsticks in and out, thinking of them touching Kally's mouth. I read the labels of *liners* and *blushers* and *foundations* and things like that.

And I knew.

However Kally left, she hadn't expected to go. She would have taken her stuff. She always changed her face and clothes before going out in public. One minute she was a sweaty worker in a zoo you wouldn't notice. Forty minutes later she was a jingly, sweet-smelling, short-skirted flirt who caused men to smile and turn their heads.

Kally was crazy about Charlie. She didn't go away easy. He'd 'ave had to beat her up something fierce. And she was strong. So when she left, if she left, her face would have been cut by Charlie's rings. She wouldn't have wanted me to see her, or anyone to see her, for a long time. Maybe ever. She wouldn't have looked like my princess.

So I had to get even with Charlie, me with my little brain.

What I did was get some of the tranquilizer the vet uses when we work on the teeth of a bear. I figured out the weight of a bear and Charlie's weight, and doped his beer. We were sitting on the bench outside the cat house when I gave it to him. When he said, "You got a key?" I pretended the caps were tight on the bottles I opened. After he drank the second bottle, his chin fell to his chest.

I dragged him to the cat house, opened the door to the habitat, and dragged him toward the middle. After I cleaned up the drag marks I returned to Charlie, drank half a bottle of beer from my side of the carton, and poured the rest on Charlie's face.

He wakes up sputtering. "Where are we?" Charlie says in a dopey voice.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The lion habitat. Smell something funky? I turned out Duchess."

Charlie sits up, propping his back with his hands. He looks two ways real fast. "You didn't."

"Yeah, I did."

"Where is she?"

"To your left. Maybe you can see the flash of her eyes. They look green in reflected light. She don't know what to do about us. She's looking at us and looking away. No need to think about the entrance. It's locked behind us."

"Put her back in the cage."

"This ain't Leo."

"Jeez, what are we going to do, Jack?"

"I don't know about you. I'm going to run for the moat. There's a gate there with a slide latch. I'm wearing my Reeboks."

"You can't outrun a lion, you damn fool! Nobody can."

"I don't have to outrun a lion. I just have to outrun you, Charlie." I begin to laugh. "I just have to outrun dopey Charlie."

"Bastard!" he screams.

I stand up. Before I can move, he is on me, shoving me to the ground. Gravel cuts my elbows. He's stealing the advantage just like he stole everything I cared about. I grab his knees, but he kicks loose. I'm no match for Charlie's weight and strength.

He stands over me, then melts into the dark.

Duchess is coming. She's overcome doubt about what it means to have two humans in the lion habitat at night.

Charlie nears the moat. His form flickers across the beam of a streetlight. The moat is twenty feet deep and twenty feet wide with ten-foot fences close to each side.

Duchess's pads swish toward me. She's hungry . . . three days hungry. She smells the blood on my elbows.

If I look a little to one side at her in the dark, I can see her. Her eyes glow. Her yellow hide catches the light from the streetlamps and gives it back as a patch not quite black. The patch gets bigger. My spit thickens in my mouth. My breath whistles high in my nose. I lift my hands to ward her off. The odor of her hangs in the air. Then she passes me . . . is beyond me.

She has a genetic pattern to chase a thing that moves.

Then it happens. Maybe when he finds the escape gate is jammed. . . . Maybe when he smells her. Maybe when he hears the swish of her pads. Maybe when she hits him. Charlie screams. The scream breaks off clean like the snap of an icicle.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I don't need to see this scene on a TV screen.

When a cat is hungry she looks around at all the animals in the herd. Some stare back at her and say, *You can't catch me.* The lion thinks, *Which one can I catch?* A baby thing, or one that limps, or one that runs—that's what she can catch.

The first to run is the nervy animal that uses its energy fast.

When a lioness catches prey, she bats it down like a kid does a Ping-Pong ball. The front paws hug it like she loves it. She nuzzles its neck for a choke hold. Her bare feet fold up and rip down. Duchess's dewclaws are like cotton-bale hooks. But after she breaks Charlie's neck, Duchess doesn't know what to do with him. She drags him around the habitat, coughing and moaning.

I get the cage key out of my pocket, slip out the attendants' door, lock it, and pick up a fresh bottle of beer from my half of the carton. I drink half of it and pour the other half on my shirt. I reach up by the door and throw the emergency alarm switch that will ring in the headquarters building. The night watchman will see the light blink on the cat-house diagram on the map of the zoo and come running.

I limp into the dimly lit grounds yelling *Help!* I'm gonna sound drunk, but not too drunk, when I tell how Charlie wanted to play with Duchess like we did with Leo.

I'll have to stop them from shooting her, of course. But I'm sure that when I open her cage and call she'll come to the cripple man who brings the meat.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE BIG EMPTY

by JUDITH POST

She'd moved into the run-down house surrounded by flat, open fields to die. Not because she'd seen a doctor, not because she was ill or had a genetic disorder. Simply because she was so empty. There was nothing left.

To her, the miles and miles of wintry farmland symbolized her state of mind. Miles and miles of nothing. Her friends called it burn-out, but she called it living death. So she'd left the city and her steady job, her circle of friends, and the pain of Rob's leaving her, and she'd come here. To a place where she was surprised if she saw two pickups pass her house on the same day. To where nightfall meant darkness, with no streetlights or distant glow from the city. To a solitude so lonely even a radio blaring couldn't penetrate the silence. And at first, she'd wallowed in it. Licking her wounds. Picking up the pieces. Sorting things out. But then she'd grown bored. Burn-out or broken heart, neither was fatal, and waiting for death wasn't everything she'd thought it would be. Finally she tired of it altogether and drove into town to look for work.

It had been easy getting a job. Miss Timmons had been the Honors English teacher for too many generations of local families, until now, in her senility, it was finally time to retire her to a nursing home and find a quick replacement. Caryn would be doing what she did best: teaching. And this time it would be different. Kids bussed to a consolidated high school from good, righteous farm families would inspire her, bring back the old feelings of accomplishment and pride in a job well done. Only city kids were rude and unmotivated, joined gangs and scribbled graffiti—traits inherent to cement jungles and low incomes. This time she'd remember why she'd wanted to be a teacher to begin with.

"I don't get you," Betsy McCormick complained during third period English Lit. "I mean, I can't wait to get out of here, away from this hick town, and see what life is like in a city. But you—you *chose* to

© *1995 by Judith Post.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

come here. What gives? You're decent-looking. You seem normal. What's the matter with you anyway?"

Caryn looked up from her copy of Shakespeare and studied her class. "I got tired of the city. I wanted to try something different."

"Yeah, right," Troy Habegger said. "Did you get in trouble or something? Do you have some big dark secret you need to hide?"

"Like she'd tell us!" Ralph Fryburg chimed in. "She's probably in trouble with the law and has to hide out. Who'd look here?"

Caryn crossed her arms and glared. The class went quiet. They'd learned quickly that Caryn wasn't a teacher one took lightly. She put a lot into her lessons, and she expected a lot of her students. She didn't buy into the "I'm only going to be a farmer" routine.

"Every mind can be expanded through reading," was her constant reminder.

"Look. You always tell us to use our minds. We can't help being curious," Kenny Nesco said. "None of our teachers had ever started in the city and ended up here. It makes us wonder."

Caryn sighed. He had a point. "I'm forty-three," she said. "Every year, teaching in the city got harder. The kids got harder to reach. More of them died."

"Died?" Betsy asked.

"Car accidents. Drug overdoses. Gang violence," Caryn explained. "Anyway, I got tired of it. It just seemed like I was putting too much into it and getting too little back, so I quit and came here."

They stared.

"Why not just try a different job?" Ralph asked. "Teaching must be a lousy job anyway. Why not go for the money? Go into business or be a bartender?"

Caryn shook her head. "I was sick of it all, having to worry if I'd get mugged, if my car would still have tires when I left a restaurant, the whole thing. . . ."

"You wimped out," Ralph said.

"I gave it all I had," she snapped, "but those kids' needs were so big, they were beginning to consume me. And I wasn't saving them anyway. We were all going down."

Betsy squirmed, frowning. "So you came here expecting it to be like Mayberry." She sounded half-mocking, half-sympathetic.

"It's not what I expected, okay?" Caryn conceded. It had come as a rude shock that country kids weren't the innocents she'd thought they'd be. They had mouths and attitudes that went with the nineties, just as every teenager in America must have, she decided. "But

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nothing is. Remember that. Reality and expectations rarely agree. When you leave here and go to the city, you'll see what I mean."

That sobered them. Maybe their dreams would be as deluded as hers.

"Have I answered all your questions?" Caryn asked. "Are you satisfied now? Because, if you don't mind, I'd like to get back to our lesson."

No one protested. She didn't think they would.

In the middle of March, Silas Greeley's rusted pickup truck made its way down the long gravel drive that led to the farmhouse and parked near the kitchen door. It was the first time he'd come since he'd handed Caryn the keys to the house and given her a short tour of the property. She was thankful that the yard was small, only a green square of grass, surrounded by wheat and soybean fields. Silas farmed these, but he'd sold her the house.

"Buying all the property I can," he'd explained. "Renting even more, but I don't need the houses. Glad somebody can use one."

She'd gotten the house for a bargain because the family who'd owned this property had gone under. Farming wasn't the simple family concern it had once been. Silas had wanted the rich fields, and she'd wanted the house, so they'd made a deal. It had worked well for both of them.

As he climbed the wooden steps to the back stoop, she went to greet him.

"Howdy." He took off the seed cap he habitually wore and fussed with it, turning it in his large hands. "Just thought I'd come and check on you. See how you were making out."

"Fine." She motioned him inside. "Care for some coffee? I just made some fresh."

"Don't mind if I do." He sat at the wooden kitchen table and looked about him uncomfortably. "Haven't done much since you moved in."

"I've been too busy," she explained, bringing him a steaming mug with a creamer and sugar bowl on a tray, "but I plan to dig in once school's out. I've got lots of ideas."

He looked out the window silently. "You're new here, and folks are kind of cliquish, so I don't s'pose you've heard."

"Heard what?"

He hesitated, sipping his coffee to give himself time. "Old lady Yardley, one field over, died sometime this week. When she didn't show up for Ladies' Sewing Circle at the church, the minister came

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to call on her. Found her at the bottom of the stairs. Been dead for a while."

"You mean she fell down the steps and died?"

"Looks that way," he said. "Don't make much sense, though. Moved her bed to the parlor a long time ago. Her arthritis made it too hard to go up and down steps."

"Maybe an animal got in upstairs and she went up to see."

"Maybe." He squinted into his mug for the answer, but shrugged in frustration. "Thing is, people are bound to talk. She left all her property to me, land, that is. Personal stuff went to her kids."

"She left her land to you?"

He shifted in his chair. "I been farming it for years, ever since her husband died. Split the profits with her, fifty-fifty."

"That seems generous."

"Old folks need money, too, you know. Not that she ever got out much. Pretty much of a shut-in with her arthritis botherin' her so much and all. But still, her kids never came home to see her, and with the extra money she could call them long distance whenever she wanted and buy the fancy chocolates she liked so much."

"Why will people talk?" Caryn asked. The whole thing seemed reasonable to her. Silas had been kind to the old woman, and she'd repaid him the way she knew he'd appreciate it most.

He frowned, his forehead puckering like corrugated cardboard, dry and weathered. Too much time spent outdoors. "This here's a small town. People talk about anything and everything, and everybody knows everybody else's business. They'll know that money's been tight for me, tryin' to buy up more land. The corn crop didn't do too good last year. It was mighty odd the way Hazel died."

"I see." She went to the stove and poured them more coffee. "Is that why you came, to let me know I shouldn't listen to their gossip?"

The idea seemed to surprise him. "Everybody listens to gossip," he said. "S'pose you'll have to make up your own mind what to think. No . . ." He fumbled with his mug. "I don't like it, that's all. That an old woman that lived alone had a nasty accident. That Hiram Becker's barn caught fire last spring, with him in it. That Josie Turner drowned the summer before that when she hit her head on a rock in the swimming hole." He gave her a level stare. "And that you live way back here, a woman all by herself."

For the first time, Caryn comprehended what he was trying to say. "You think I might be in danger?" she asked.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Just seems funny, don't it? So many accidents in such a small town."

Caryn thought about it. She'd become so used to deaths and violence in the city that an accidental death a year didn't seem much to her. "I don't know," she answered honestly.

He shook his head, embarrassed. "I've prob'ly just been stuck in the house too much, with too much time to think." Pushing himself to his feet, he said, "Hazel's funeral is Tuesday. S'pose most of the town'll be there. Thought you should know."

"Thanks for telling me." She walked with him to the kitchen door and watched him U-turn at the empty chicken coop and drive away. Silas Greeley wasn't the type of man to look for worries. He had enough of them at his doorstep. A widower, he'd raised a boy all by himself—a baby that townsfolk called "slow" behind Silas's back.

"But pretty," Mrs. Henderson had told Caryn at the grocery store. "Pretty and sweet. No wonder that little tramp, Heather Merchant, snapped him up. All the other boys knew what she was. Now she's got a good husband, and her daddy-in-law keeps a roof over both their heads. He'd work himself into a grave to keep his boy happy."

Yes, Silas Greeley was no stranger to hard work and hard times, Caryn decided. He must be pretty concerned if he drove to her house to tell her about Hazel Yardley's death.

"It wasn't Silas that offed her," Ralph Fryburg was saying as Caryn strode into the classroom.

"Who else would it be?" Troy Habegger argued. "She left him all her property."

"It was his boy," Ralph said.

"Jake?" Betsy shook her head. "He's too sweet. He comes into the restaurant every morning for breakfast. He wouldn't hurt a fly."

"You're just soft on him 'cause he's good-looking," Troy scoffed. "And the only reason he eats out every morning is 'cause the slut he married won't get her lazy ass out of bed before noon."

"My dad says she's the one who put him up to it," Ralph explained, "so old Silas could have a bigger farm. Means more money for her and her retard husband."

"You're both pigs," Betsy told them.

"Better than being a sow," Troy shot back.

Betsy's face flushed red. She was a little overweight, and on the plain side, but if he meant his remark to silence her, he'd underestimated her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Why would it make any difference?" she persisted. "Silas was already farming her land. Why would he have to kill her for it?"

"Because," Ralph said, "he was giving her fifty percent of the profits. I bet that made Heather red under the collar, the way she likes to spend money. And because the old bat was getting really feeble. There was talk of sticking her in a nursing home. To pay for that, she'd have had to sell everything she had."

Caryn let them argue until the bell rang, then briskly started her lesson, putting a finish to the gossip. They took her cue: there'd be no talking about Hazel's death on her time. As soon as the bell rang to dismiss them, though, they started up again.

Betsy turned to Kenny Nesco and said, "You've been awfully quiet. What do you think? Do you think Jake killed Hazel Yardley?"

Kenny shrugged. "That's up to the law to decide. As for me, I like to believe everyone's innocent until proven guilty. Gossip can get ugly. I don't want to be a part of it."

Caryn was surprised by the conviction underlying his words, but Troy Habegger supplied part of an answer for her.

"That's because everyone's always talked about your old man. If my dad was the town drunk, I wouldn't gossip either."

Kenny leveled a quiet stare at him, and Troy immediately tried to eat his words. "Look. It's not like it's your fault. Everyone thinks you and your mom are something, sticking it out and all."

Kenny's expression didn't change, and Troy said, "Forget it, man. I didn't mean anything by it."

"Yes, you did. You like to hurt people. It makes you feel big. But that's your problem, not mine." Kenny picked up his books and left the classroom.

The rest glanced at each other uneasily, then followed.

Caryn couldn't believe how much she was looking forward to spring break. She was tired of the conjectures and whispers. This was one part of living in a small town she hadn't anticipated and didn't like. She was fairly confident that Silas Greeley was right, though, that the talk would eventually die down. Once everyone had a week off and tractors plowed fields again and boys went hunting in the woods, people would have other things to occupy their minds. So when the first week of April came, Caryn was ready for it.

She drove three towns over for the weekend, hoping to buy some furniture at a big auction that Mrs. Henderson had told her about.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Everybody spring-cleans around here," Mrs. Henderson had explained, "and lots of folks don't care if a chair or a table's supposed to be an antique. They just want the junk out of their attics."

Caryn didn't care if a chair or table was an antique, either. She just needed more furniture to fill her rooms. The few things she'd brought from her apartment when she'd moved here hadn't gone very far. She was pleasantly surprised when she saw the oak rocking chairs, heavy mahogany dining room tables, and old horsehair sofas plunked in the grassy meadow where the auction took place. She'd rented a U-Haul and filled it before she started home late Sunday afternoon.

She stopped for supper at the Greasy Spoon Cafe so she wouldn't have to cook when she got back.

"Where's Betsy?" she asked Claire Morris after she'd given her order. "I always try to sit at her station."

"Girl didn't come in tonight," Claire snapped. "Didn't call in, either. Parents said they haven't seen her since early this morning. Damn kids. Spring break and they do as they please."

Caryn thought about that as she ate her meal. Alone, as she'd eaten every dinner since she'd come here. It didn't sound like Betsy not to call in. Betsy was usually dependable. She was studying hard at school so she could go to college to be a nurse. Betsy prided herself on being responsible.

Frowning, Caryn had to admit the girl had been different lately, though. She'd had sort of a glow about her. Caryn had put it down to the upcoming spring break, but maybe there was something else. Troy Habegger had been surlier than usual, too. Was there a connection?

Finishing her meal, she paid at the cash register and left a bigger tip than normal for Claire. The woman looked run ragged. On the drive home, she felt her spirits sink. Why was she bothering with this charade? Why pretend that she was ever going to be happy again? She had to admit, finally and emphatically, that teaching had lost its appeal for her. City or country, it made no difference. And she was past forty. She didn't want to start over.

As she pulled into her gravel drive, she had to brake to keep from hitting Jake Greeley, who was pulling out.

Rolling down his car window, Jake said, "Dad thought I should come over to see if you needed any help unloading furniture. How about it?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She shook her head. "I'm too tired tonight. I'll park the U-Haul in the barn and worry about the furniture tomorrow."

"Give us a call when you're ready," he said. He put his pickup in reverse and backed onto the grass to let her by.

Nice, she thought, driving into the old barn. That had been country hospitality at its best. Fumbling for her key while she climbed the back steps, she inserted it in the lock only to have the kitchen door swing open before she could turn it.

A shiver ran down her spine, and a knot tightened in her stomach. She'd locked the door before she'd left. She was sure she had. City habits. Swallowing hard, she reached inside the door and flipped on the light. Still standing on the stoop, she peered through the kitchen windows, studying every inch of the room she could see. There was no movement, but she couldn't see below the kitchen counters. Someone could be squatting there, waiting.

Reaching into her purse, she dug to the bottom and found a canister of Mace she'd carried in the city and never bothered to remove. She held it in front of her as she stepped through the door. Nothing. No one. She went to the drawer by the sink and took out the butcher knife. With the Mace in one hand and the knife in the other, she started through each room of the house.

The ground floor was safe, she was sure. There wasn't enough furniture for anyone to hide anywhere. The basement was another matter. With the furnace and shelves that held old jars of canned vegetables, it would be harder to see an intruder. She took the chicken's way out and locked the door, then wedged a kitchen chair under its doorknob. If anyone was down there, they could stay there until they got the coal bin doors pried open.

At last, it was time to look upstairs. She used only the one bedroom and the bath. The other two rooms were empty. Making her legs go up the steps, she held the Mace in front of her. The knife she kept in a firm grip by her side, ready to ram. She made her way down the upstairs hall with her back against the wall. No one was going to take her by surprise. She checked the two empty rooms first. Empty.

When she reached the open door of the bathroom, she hurriedly whipped a hand in and flipped on the light switch. No sound. Her eyes swept the room, then stopped. Bile rose in her throat, and she turned her head in horror.

Betsy McCormick lay in the tub, blood staining her throat and the front of her shirt and the porcelain of the tub. Blood from an

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ugly gash that sliced her neck so deeply that her head looked as if it were dangling from a thread.

Caryn's knees shook, then her whole body caught the tremor. She pressed herself against the hallway, taking deep breaths, trying not to vomit. It took all of her effort to make her way to her bedroom and sink onto the old quilt of her double bed.

The killer might be in this room. She knew it, but she was too numb to care. Instead, she reached for the phone on her nightstand and dialed the courthouse.

"Hello?" She wasn't sure whom she was talking to, but it didn't matter. "This is Caryn Lockhart, on County Road Six. Betsy McCormick is dead in my bathtub. Someone should come get her." Then she hung up and curled into a fetal position. And she wept.

She told the sheriff everything she knew.

"And Jake Greeley was pulling out of your driveway while you were pulling in?" he asked again.

"Yes, his father had sent him to help me with the furniture."

"He says."

"I'm sure you can verify that," Caryn said.

"You don't think he killed her, do you?"

Caryn sighed. She'd replayed her return home over and over again in her mind. "If he did, he'd have to be an awfully good actor to be so cheerful when I met him. From what I've heard, I kind of doubt that. He didn't have any blood on him, either. It seems to me that whoever killed Betsy . . ." She shut her eyes and swallowed hard. "Whoever did that should have gotten bloody."

Sheriff Taylor nodded. "I'm not trying to make this difficult for you, ma'am, but people often remember a few more things the second time they talk to me. Like what you said just now, that helps."

She took a good long look at him. In his late fifties, his face was as creased as a pug's. His eyes had the same wistful quality, too. "I'm sorry," she said. "I want to help you as much as I can."

"You are, ma'am. You're holding up real good. Now, I hate to ask you, but was there anything you noticed when you first saw Betsy?"

"All the blood," she answered immediately. "And that it was sticky, that it wasn't running anymore. It had stopped."

"And when did you leave for the auction?" Sheriff Taylor asked.

"Saturday morning, about ten-thirty."

He nodded. "Probably most of the town knew you were going." He walked to her kitchen counter and poured them each another cup of coffee.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I wouldn't doubt it," she admitted. "I talked about it with Mrs. Henderson at the grocery store and with my students at school."

"So anybody would have known they could use your house while you were gone."

She sipped her coffee, studying her hands. "I thought I'd move to the country and leave all this behind. Instead, it's even closer."

"Closer?"

"In the city, people were getting shot or mugged all the time. I read about it in the newspaper every morning, but it always felt far away from me. Every once in a while it might be a student from our building, but I taught Honors English. It wasn't anyone I knew very well, and it still bothered me. But it was nothing like this."

"I've never gotten used to it," he told her. "You get used to dealing with it, but I don't think it would be healthy to get too calloused about it. I think it says a lot for you that you still care."

A short while later, he waited while she packed a few things, then he drove her into town to stay in a little efficiency apartment over the jewelry store. "Don Porter used to live over the shop before he and his wife built a fancy house on the edge of town. A clerk lived there for a while, but it's empty now. It'll be awhile before we're done at your place. Don said you can stay here as long as you want. There's separate stairs coming up."

She was depressed for the rest of spring break. Every time she went anywhere people asked her about finding Betsy until finally she stayed in the little apartment and rarely got out of bed. She dreaded teaching school on Monday and facing her English class. It took all of her professionalism and courage not to call in sick.

When fourth-period Honors English started, she walked to the front of her desk and leaned against it. She'd decided to hit the problem head-on, deal with it, and then put it behind her.

"You've all heard about Betsy's death," she stated. "If there are any questions, I'd rather we addressed them. Well?"

"When do you get to go back to your house?" Ralph asked. "My dad said they should be finished with it by now."

"Today," she told them. That was another thing she wasn't looking forward to, but the sooner she did it, the better. The longer she stayed away, the larger her fear of returning grew.

"Was it really horrible?" Troy Habegger asked. "Or was it sort of neat, like scary movies?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She raised an eyebrow and her voice went flat. "It was really horrible. Any death is sad, but a violent death is terrible. Only a sick person could find anything entertaining in it."

"How are you doing?" Kenny Nesco asked. "My mom says this has to be especially awful for you because you came here to get away, and now this . . ."

Tears misted her eyes and she blinked them away. At least somebody understood. "It's been pretty hard," she confessed, "but I'll be all right."

"Aren't you afraid to go back there?" Troy asked. "I mean, maybe the killer isn't very picky. Maybe next time, it could be you."

"I'm sure a lot of people feel that way," she said, "not just me."

"But you're a lady," he persisted. "Way out in the country. All alone."

"And Hiram Becker was a man in a barn, and Josie Turner was a girl at a swimming hole," she told him. "No one's really safe."

His eyes went wide. "What are you getting at? Josie drowned. It was an accident."

"Was it?" she demanded. "For such a small town, a lot of people have been dying."

The class went silent, and Caryn said, "All right, we've gotten that out of the way now. From now on, we can concentrate on English."

It had been difficult, she told herself on the drive home, but she thought it had been worth it. The issue had been dealt with out in the open and now it was closed.

Turning onto her drive, she touched her foot to the brake in a reflex reaction. Silas Greeley's truck was parked on the turn-off, and he was waiting for her. She didn't want to see him. Worse, when her car came into view, the door on the passenger's side opened, too, and Silas and his son stepped from the truck to greet her.

Her heart thudded against her ribs. Why were they here? Biting her lip, she forced herself to remain calm as she parked and went to meet them.

"Miss Lockhart," Silas said, "me and Jake here wanted to think of some way to thank you for bein' so fair when you talked to Sheriff Taylor about what happened. So we decided to surprise you."

"Oh, but that's not necessary," she protested. "I only told him what I could."

"But that's the whole point, ma'am," Silas insisted. "Around here, rumor's usually like a game of telephone. The truth gets lost in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tellin'. You told it like it was, no extras, no gossip."

Jake stared at her as his father spoke, making her uneasy. Finally, he said, "Most people don't care much about me 'cause they say I'm slow. You treated me like a real person."

She frowned. "I'm glad I could help you."

"So we wanted to return the favor," Silas said. "Let us show you what we done." He motioned for her to follow them inside the house.

Her flesh went cold. How had they gotten inside? What did they want?

"I have an extra set of keys," Silas explained, "in case there's ever an emergency here. I don't believe in stickin' my nose in other people's business, but I couldn't think of nothin' else." He nodded his head toward the living room.

She looked inside and let out a sigh. "You shouldn't have."

Smiling, he said, "It was Jake's idea. He said you'd bought lots of furniture at that auction. If it's not in the right spot, we'll move it wherever you want."

"No, it's lovely," she said, looking at the furniture carefully arranged in each room. "This was so kind."

"No trouble at all," Silas said. "We took the U-Haul back for you, too."

She'd forgotten all about it. Shaking her head, she said, "I can't tell you how much I appreciate this."

"Glad to oblige," Silas said. "Put new locks on your doors and windows, too. The keys are on the kitchen table. Take care now, you hear? No use taking chances."

Thanking him, she walked them to the door. As she hooked the latch on the screen and watched them drive away, she thought how nice so many people had been to her. She had to concentrate on the good, as well as the bad.

Troy Habegger was edgy all the rest of the week. He was too distracted to disrupt class more than a couple of times.

"Josie had been his girl," Ralph told her after class on Friday. "When you said she might have been murdered, you messed Troy up pretty bad."

"I'm surprised no one had considered it before," she said.

Ralph grimaced. "She was the first, I guess. No one thought much about it. Just that it was sad."

She could understand that. Hindsight was always clearer than foresight. What she didn't understand was why he followed her home on Friday night. She always went to the grocery store after

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she cashed her paycheck to stock up on groceries for the week, then she ate at the cafe as her Friday night treat, then she went home. It was a ritual, almost. Maybe too much so. Everyone must know her pattern by now. Clearly, Troy did, because as she turned onto County Road 6, he pulled out of a small lane and followed her in his souped-up black Camaro.

When she pulled into her driveway, he pulled in after her.

Stupid, she told herself, too late. Now she was trapped. As he opened his car door and walked toward her, she thought about making a run for the house; but she'd never reach it in time. Instead, her hand snaked out and she locked her car doors, then she rolled up the windows.

"What are you doing?" Troy yelled as he stopped beside her car. "Can I talk to you?"

She shook her head. "It's late," she said. "I'll meet you at the cafe for lunch tomorrow. We can talk then." Maybe it had started with Josie, she thought. Troy was a little unstable. Maybe he hadn't meant to kill her, but he'd discovered he liked it. What had he asked her about Betsy? "Was it really horrible, or was it sort of neat, like horror movies?" She knew he got drunk almost every weekend, sneaking beer behind people's barns. Had Hiram Becker caught him, was that why he'd killed him?

He was tipsy now, she could tell, and it wasn't even that late. Angry, he kicked the side of her car. "Damn it! I drove all the way out here to tell you some things, and you won't even talk to me."

A good try, she thought. But it wouldn't work. She wasn't getting out of her car for anything.

"Josie was a nice girl," he yelled. "I didn't care about her being pregnant. I was planning on marrying her, anyway."

Caryn froze. It was beginning to fall into place. Josie had told him he had to marry her at the swimming hole. He'd lost control and drowned her. Maybe not on purpose. But it had given him a taste for murder.

"Never mind!" he bellowed. "Forget it. I was gonna tell you some things, but if you don't want to hear them, it's no skin off my back." He stomped to his Camaro and fired it up. A minute later, he was hurtling down the gravel drive and back to town.

Caryn sat silently listening for several minutes. Maybe it was a trick, but eventually she realized she didn't want to sit in her car all night, and she should certainly be able to run into her house and lock the door, even if Troy had doubled back somehow.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She scooped her grocery bags up in both arms, got her house key ready, and bolted from the car, running all-out. With a quick turn the kitchen door unlocked, and she was shouldering it open when a shadow detached itself from the darkness at the corner of the stoop, leapt to the top step, and pushed her inside. Immediately, the door slammed shut behind her and the deadbolt slid into place.

Whirling, she stared in surprise. "Kenny?"

He glanced at the hand she'd jammed deep into her jacket pocket. "Are you all right? Troy didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No, I'm fine." She didn't move, didn't unwrap her fingers from the can of Mace. Not that he knew what she was gripping. Maybe he thought she had a gun.

He relaxed slightly. "You really upset him, talking about Josie. He hasn't been the same since she drowned. None of us mentions her to him."

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. "Why were you hiding in the shadows?"

He shrugged. "Troy and I drove around for a while after school. He downed some beers and started to talk a little crazy. I didn't think he'd really do anything, but I didn't want to take a chance. When he followed you up your drive and you ran like hell for the house, I guess I panicked a little. I thought Troy might still be after you."

So had she. It was an easy mistake to make. "I don't think he meant to hurt me," she said. "I think he wanted to talk, but he'd scared me so much, I wasn't listening. Now I think I overreacted."

"Who could blame you? You're new here. You don't really know any of us yet." He looked at the groceries she was still trying to balance. "Need help with those?"

She shook her head. "To be honest, my nerves are so shot, I'd rather be alone. I appreciate your concern, but I need some time to pull myself together."

He nodded solemnly. "I know the feeling. See you on Monday." And he quietly turned and went out the kitchen door, pulling it shut behind him with a rattle.

She watched from the window until he was at the edge of her property. Only then did she lower her groceries to the kitchen table and turn the deadbolt lock on the door. She checked each room for intruders before she came back downstairs to put her groceries away.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She was sitting in the oak rocker, sipping a cup of hot tea and reading a book of poetry, when she heard the key slide into the lock, turn, and the back door open.

She rose to her feet, backing toward the front door, when Kenny Nesco padded into the living room to join her. Her key ring dangled from his hand. What a fool she'd been! In her panic, she'd never removed it from the door.

"Sorry about this," he said. "I mean, you haven't done anything mean or bad. You don't even sit and watch things happen, pretending there's nothing wrong, like my mom does. That's why you came here, to get away from all that, because it bothered you. I respect you for that."

She stared at the long, broad butcher's knife in his hand. She opened her mouth to say something, but nothing would come out, so she pressed her lips together and waited.

"It's just that you don't belong here, you know? So you look at things differently and cause things to shift a little. Everyone around here would have blamed Jake Greeley for Hazel's death. They'd have gossiped about it, but they wouldn't have done anything."

"Did Hazel do something mean?" Caryn asked. Her mind raced with ideas to save herself, but none of them seemed promising. The irony of the whole thing hit her, that she'd come here wanting to die—and now she was stalling, hoping to avoid it.

"When all of her kids moved away, my dad made me go to her house and mow her lawn, do all kinds of repair work and stuff. He called it being a good neighbor. She'd always pay me a little. Not much. She couldn't have hired anyone for what she gave me. And my dad always took the money when I got home. She always went upstairs to get the money, but then she got so senile, she couldn't remember anything. I wasn't going to take it all. Just what she owed me. But she wasn't as deaf as I thought. She came up and caught me."

"So you pushed her," Caryn said.

"I've never hurt anyone who didn't hurt me," he said. "You wouldn't mean to hurt me, but you would." He was walking toward her, and fear kept her rooted to the spot. She didn't want to run and be chased down. She'd never outrun him, anyway. She didn't want to try to wrestle the knife from his hand. He was too strong.

So she watched and waited.

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Suddenly she felt tired and defeated. What had happened to her life, her dreams? She couldn't make it in the city, and she hadn't made it here. What was wrong with her?

"This time, there'll be an investigation," she argued. "How many times do you think you can kill and get away with it?"

He grinned. "Everyone knows Troy came out here. Josie was Troy's girlfriend. Who do you think they'll suspect?"

The kitchen door flew open with a bang. There was a rush of feet, and Troy Habegger lunged into the room. "You bastard!" he shouted as he barreled straight for Kenny.

Kenny turned, gripping the knife; but Troy threw himself at him, and both boys fell to the floor, struggling as they rolled. When they stopped, Kenny was on top. He pushed an elbow onto Troy's throat, and raised his arm to bury the knife deep in his chest, but Caryn gripped his hand with both of her own and wouldn't let go. When he loosened his grip on Troy to shake her off, Troy lunged again. This time when they quit rolling, Kenny was lying on top of Troy once more, but his body was limp. Shrugging him off, Troy stood and stared at the wooden handle protruding from Kenny's back.

"The door was open," he explained. "I'm sorry I scared you before. Once the beer wore off, I felt bad about it. I went to Kenny's, but he wasn't there. Then I got to thinking about Josie. I'd wanted to marry her, but the baby wasn't mine. She'd always had a soft spot for Kenny, felt sorry for him, you know? Then I got to thinking about old Hiram Becker. Kenny had worked at his place one summer. When we were driving around together after school, he was telling me how things weren't the same since you'd come to town. He *wanted* to get me riled up, and that made me wonder . . ."

"I'm glad you did," Caryn said, her heart finally beginning to slow.

Troy looked down at his feet. "Kenny was my best friend." His voice broke.

"He was sick. He would have only gotten worse."

"I know that now, but I wouldn't have if you hadn't made me think. That's good sometimes, I guess."

The blood stain was spreading across Kenny's shirt. "We'd better call Sheriff Taylor," she said.

"They're going to kick you out of your house again," he told her. "But believe me. Once this is over, it'll never happen again. This isn't like the city."

No, it wasn't. There were good people here, and she had made a difference, after all. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When mystery aficionados talk about the revolution that occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s with the emergence of the strong female sleuth, they oughtn't to forget the work of Janice Law, whose fictional investigator Anna Peters is about as tough as they come. Ms. Law's first Anna Peters novel (1976) was nominated for an Edgar Allan Poe Award and she has gone on to write a number of other novels and stories both in the Peters series and out. Her new story for us is somewhat off her usual track in that it is pure psychological suspense . . .

A MEETING AT THE CAFE VISCONTI

by JANICE LAW

The sun still lit a high, cloudless sky, but the worst of the heat had sunk into the sienna- and ocher-toned buildings, making them glow as if by some subtle, internal fire. The big courtyard of the cafe was now mostly shadowed, and, freed of the heat and glare, the Bolognese were loitering over a Campari or a glass of mineral water or ordering pretty dishes of ices and biscuits. Michael smelled the smoke of their cigarettes, exhaust from the street, and a woman's passing perfume, all touched with that more elusive smell, the faint exhalation of old stone and old buildings. Overhead, the swifts were beginning to swoop and twitter, while fat pigeons whirred between the tables and looked for crumbs underfoot.

Michael opened his notebook and glanced again at the column of figures. He had done all right. More than all right. The astronomy faculty had liked his presentation, admired the new software, understood the documentation; he had done the translations and now he had the orders sewed up. It was a good feeling, and he was thinking how much he liked Italians in general and the Bolognese in particular when a woman's voice asked, "Do you speak English?"

Sometimes Michael ignored these appeals. His Italian was fluent, nearly perfect; his German was passable; his French, very good; and

© 1995 by Janice Law.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he could manage in both Portuguese and Dutch. Sometimes he would shrug, smile sympathetically, and shake his head.

"You must be American," said the voice. "I've got one of the older models. A bit slow now."

She must have noticed his company briefcase. Michael turned to see a nicely dressed woman with faded blond hair pulled back into an untidy knot. She was wearing oversized sunglasses with very dark lenses, and Michael was reflected as a tiny figure against a vast and somber sky.

"That must be the P–ninety-six?" he asked politely. You never know when you may find a customer.

"A generation before, actually. I've got one of the P–eighties." She was somewhere in late middle age, a tall, sturdy woman with the confident smile of someone used to meeting people, used to making friends, or, perhaps, like Michael, used to making useful contacts.

"Really! Bane of our existence," Michael joked. "How can we sell new software when those old dinosaurs are still going strong?"

"Slow but sound," she said.

"A vintage model," Michael admitted. "For personal use. For business applications now, our new line is the only thing to consider." He could hear himself switching into his sales mode and smiled. "But you're not here on business."

Her expression adjusted subtly, and Michael wondered if he'd given offense. He nodded toward the guidebook and map that lay on her table.

"Travel and business," she said after a moment, and there was a long pause. "You could say that travel has become my business."

A waiter approached, very bright, neat, and important like all the cafe staff, and she ordered a San Pellegrino. Her Italian was quite passable, Michael noticed.

"I look at restaurants, hotels, tourist itineraries," she remarked. "This is only my second time in Bologna. An underrated city."

"One of the nicest in Italy."

"That is what I think. I think it's ready to be an important secondary destination if presented in the right way. Much more could be done with the university area as a package of entertainment, culture, and history. But not too touristy. That's important for the publications I write for."

Michael smiled at her enthusiasm.

"You're wondering why I spoke to you," she said.

"Americans abroad usually appeal for translations."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You are"—she hesitated, tipped her head to one side—"thirty-six, thirty-seven?"

"Thirty-six. Thirty-seven soon," he added and instantly regretted it, for she said, "My son's age exactly. He would have been thirty-seven next month. I saw you sitting there, and I said, he's Mark's age. That's what Mark would have looked like. That's what Mark would look like sitting in Bologna at the Cafe Visconti."

"Your son . . . died?"

"I don't know. I think now that he is dead, but I don't *know* for a certainty." Her expression momentarily turned vague and distracted, and Michael began to fear eccentricity, mental disturbance, all the anguish of emotional illness.

"I'm very sorry," he said. He would wait a minute, he thought, then call the waiter and ask for his check. He was glad now that he had his briefcase and could use the excuse of a meeting.

"I didn't believe it for a long time," she said in a reflective tone. "There are days when I don't believe it yet. I can understand those MIA families, I really can. Until you have something to bury, you don't believe. It doesn't seem real, does it? Someone is young and alive without a problem in the world and then—he's gone."

"An auto accident?" Michael asked.

She shrugged her shoulders and something about the gesture made him think that she must once have been attractive, desirable. "I don't think it could have been an auto accident. Those are reported. No, he disappeared years ago on a cross-country trip. He'd been camping out, hitching from one town to the next. It was the thing to do then, backpack, hitchhike, 'see the world.' Perhaps you did the same yourself."

Michael nodded before he could stop himself. "I traveled around a bit after my senior year."

"You'd have been seventeen," she said very definitely. "You might have been at the same campsites. It's a small world. When I travel, I meet so many people . . ." The waiter appeared with a coaster, a napkin, a little bottle beaded with condensation, and a glass garnished with a slice of lime; he laid them out smartly and was gone with a flourish. ". . . who might have known Mark," she resumed without a break, "who might have seen him, who were the right age or in the right place. Over the long run, that has become comforting."

"There was an investigation, of course . . ."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No 'of course' about it," she said sharply. "It was strictly after a fashion. You know that was also the time for running away, dropping out. It was hard to convince the authorities that Mark would never just have disappeared."

"You did not accept that."

"Never."

"I suppose you searched, yourself . . ."

"Searched, hired detectives, put up posters, leafleted the entire area. It was in northern Arizona—not a very populous place. I don't *think* I left anything undone. That's a bad thought, the thought of having left something undone. I still wake up sometimes at night, sit up in bed with my heart pounding, thinking, 'I've forgotten something. What was it I was supposed to do? Where was it I was supposed to go?' But I haven't forgotten anything." She took a sip of her mineral water and looked around the cafe and then back at Michael. It was impossible to see her eyes behind the sunglasses. "I can assure you I've followed every lead, every clue."

"I'm sure you have," Michael said. He put his hand on his briefcase, ready to get up, ready to leave.

"Twenty years," she said. "A lifetime. It's been a very curious life. But you'd have a different perspective. Twenty years ago, you'd have been seventeen, and twenty years later my son would have looked like you."

"It's a very sad story," Michael said and shifted forward in his seat. He looked around with his hand half raised, but the alert and efficient waiters were all inside.

"There was a grove of aspens," she said, and as soon as she spoke, Michael felt the shift of some inner tide. "There was a small lake, too. When I first went there, the aspens were turning; I remember little pale gold leaves shivering in the wind and, behind them, mountains the color of lead."

"But you said he 'disappeared,' " Michael said. "No one was to blame, was there? There was no suspicion, no evidence? You've said as much. . . ."

She studied her glass for a moment. "There was evidence," she said, "if you looked hard enough. What was hard was to convince the authorities to do something. To convince them that Mark would never have . . ."

"It's hard to be sure sometimes," Michael said abruptly. "It's hard to know what anyone will do in a given situation."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"But some people you just *know,*" she said. "In extraordinary circumstances, yes, that's true. In extraordinary circumstances, who knows what we would do. I look at those poor Bosnians and Romanians sitting in the arcades . . ."

"Some of them are professionals," Michael said. He prided himself on knowing a scam when he saw one. "They're refugees today, Gypsies tomorrow, pickpockets the day after."

"They look miserable enough," she said, "wherever they come from. That is a drawback to Bologna."

"As an 'important secondary destination'?"

Like so many determined and energetic people, she was immune to satire. "What would we do in their place?" she asked in turn. "In their place, with poverty and disaster? That is one thing. But on a camping trip in the West?"

"Sometimes extraordinary things find us in ordinary places."

"That was what I said! I said something terrible must have happened. That's why I believe he must be dead."

"Other things can happen," Michael began. "People have been known to—"

"No, no, you don't understand. Let me tell you. . . "

"I'm sorry. It's been good talking to you, but I really must be going." Even to himself, Michael found his voice unconvincing. "I've got this meeting."

"Not now, surely," she said, imperturbably, relentlessly. "This is the hour for cafes, for aperitifs, for reflection. Especially for reflection. I see you are the sort of man who reflects, who remembers. As soon as I mentioned the lake and the aspens, I saw that you were a man who remembers."

Michael laughed and gathered his forces. "You made me think about camping in the mid-seventies. Evenings in a sleeping bag, listening to Jimi Hendrix, the Doors, and the Stones."

"Yes," she said eagerly, "all that wonderful music. All that loud, wonderful music. Generation-breaking music, but not for us. Mark and I grew up together. Was that an advantage or a disadvantage, do you think?"

Michael shrugged. "My parents were older than average. Quite a bit older."

"I had Mark when I was eighteen. So, you see, I understood him. I understood his generation. The wanting to get away, to experience life, to see the world. Our town was small. The button factory and the cloth mill were still running then. 'Make something of yourself

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

or you'll end up in the mill,' that was what I was told as a girl. And then the sixties came and the new electronics plant and the real-estate businesses and it wasn't as hard for a woman to earn a living anymore."

"And Mark's father? What did he do?" Michael asked abruptly, although it was rude, although it would surely delay his departure.

"That's what Mark always wanted to know."

"He didn't know?"

"It was irrelevant, completely irrelevant."

"Perhaps not to him," Michael protested.

"Mark's father was like me, young and foolish. But he didn't have any staying power, and so he became irrelevant."

"Boys need a man in their lives."

"Of course, you had a father. A conventional life. But Mark had his grandfather. My parents were very kind. I had a wonderful life when Mark was small. I had a part-time job with the local travel agent. Twenty-five hours a week. The rest of the time I took care of Mark. We went fishing and on picnics along the river; we went to the swings in the little town park. We never missed the children's matinee at the movie theater or the special programs at the library. That was the happiest time of my life."

"Then he grew up," Michael said. "He got too old for the park and picnics and being perfect."

She took a sip of her mineral water and ignored the implications. "It was an adjustment when he went to school. Though I had to work, so I was away part of the time anyway. And then he did so well, no one could say I hadn't done a good job with him. No one. He started the trumpet in elementary school, then played with the high-school band. Do you play an instrument?"

"As a child." He remembered the shiny, flaring brass mouth, the padded valves, the amazing amount of slimy fluid distilled from puffing out the notes of the "Triumphal March."

She smiled. "And sports. Baseball, of course. That was the big sport in our town. We had an adult team as well. And he insisted on playing football, although he was too light. That was the only thing we ever argued about. I went to all his games, and I suffered through every one of them until his junior year. Junior year, he broke his right leg in a game. I remember that awful sound, that terrible, unmistakable crack. I was in the stands and the sound went right through my heart."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She put her hand to the base of her throat. Her hands were strong and capable, Michael noticed, but spotted with age and beginning to wrinkle.

"After that, I said 'no more,' though I think he played sometimes with the boys after school. I think he did."

"But he was off the team?" Michael asked.

"The leg didn't heal quite right. It was shattered. A bad, bad break. And the local hospital wasn't the greatest—I still regret I didn't insist he be taken to Providence or Hartford. But he was in such pain, and I was scared to death. Do you have children?"

Michael shook his head. "I haven't been married long. We're hoping."

"You will know when you have children. The fear, the regrets. It left him with a slight limp. Most of the time it was undetectable, but when he was tired, you noticed."

"Athletic injuries are so common now," Michael said. "My right knee isn't all it might be." He was aware of a strange, tactile memory, not in his mind so much as in his shoulders: the weight of pads, the last of the old-fashioned leather pads, and the shock of impact, the springy force of bone and muscle and leather.

"Oh yes," she agreed. He could feel how much she wanted to agree with him. "And contemporary lives have certain parallels, certain points in common. Like you and Mark. The same age, the same desire to 'see the world.' Music as a child, too, and sports? Did you play sports, too?"

"Soccer," Michael said too quickly. "And a little tennis."

"Tennis, too," she said with a smile. Her smiles were beginning to make him uneasy. She seemed to be finding some sort of confirmation from him, and Michael told himself that he was crazy to be trapped in a cafe by this stranger.

"It's getting late," he said, looking at his watch. "I really do have a meeting."

The old buildings were turning from sienna to a deep, shadowy umber, and the waiters were putting down the umbrellas. The sky had shifted imperceptibly from blue to pink, and her sunglasses reflected an amber and purple void.

"Of course," she said, "of course you must keep your appointment."

There was a hint of condescension in her voice, and Michael said, "It might not have been the way you remember. It might not have been that way at all."

"But you know nothing about it," she said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He never knew his father," Michael said. "You told me that. What boy wouldn't be unhappy? And in a small town . . ."

"Where everyone knows everything? Is that what you think?"

"Children are cruel."

"And adults, too. We are not an attractive species, are we? You think he was miserable, that he ran away, that for twenty years, *twenty years!*, he left his mother wondering what had happened to him. Is that what you think?"

"I don't . . ."

"He wrote me every week," she said triumphantly. "Or called. Called more than wrote. Collect. My phone bills were huge. Hi, Mom, he'd say. I'm in Cleveland or Denver or Mesa. Wherever. I was going to fly to San Francisco and meet him there in two weeks. To celebrate his cross-country trip. Does that sound like alienated youth? I got the records from the phone company and showed them to the police. Week after week, he called. Then new friends, the campsite up in the aspens with the lake and the lead-colored mountains, and he was never heard from again. What do you think?"

"*His* story might be different," Michael said. "He might have wanted to know—"

"Secrets?" she asked. Her well-shaped hands had rather long nails. Rather long; he had not noticed that. And though the light was almost gone, she still had not removed her glasses. Michael turned slightly. Three of the waiters were back by their station. One was smoking, the other two were starting to wipe up the tables and put away the chairs.

"What do we owe children?" she asked. "Love, care, a decent life. Do we owe them our history? Yes? Even if it is a terrible one?"

"It isn't for me to say. It was for your son."

"But he's been dead for twenty years. You must answer for him."

Michael felt his chest tighten. He'd developed a touch of asthma after he turned thirty; it acted up under stress or in smoky places. "I would want to know," he said. "He would be a grown man and he'd want to know."

"But now Mark would have a secret, too," she said. "As you must. By thirty-six, one has had time to accumulate follies and secrets. Isn't that right?"

"But you believe your son is dead."

"Mark has one of two secrets: the secret of his death or the secret of his disappearance." She leaned forward in her chair, and for the first time, Michael caught a glimpse of her eyes, light, lighter than

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his own, intent, pained, and cruel. He understood that she was not pathetic but dangerous. "I propose a swap," she said.

"I can see you were always manipulative," he said before he could stop himself. "Trading off one thing for another. Trading silence for a 'nice' life, for money, for protection."

"For my son's happiness," she replied quickly. "For a way to live. I was eighteen years old. No, I lied, I was barely seventeen when he was born, and scared to death. At seventeen, he was on a cross-country trip to 'find himself,' but at that age I was faced with supporting an infant and myself with all my hopes and dreams ended."

"You should have thought of that before you got into bed."

"Do you suppose that's what he thought?" she asked. "I would be happy if he had, but I think he had other fears. You would understand that. I can see you have imagination. I can see you have an appreciation of what is not ordinary."

"Things happen," Michael said. A little breeze sprang up out of the arcades and chilled his damp chest.

"Things happened up in the aspen grove," she said. "I am an intelligent woman. I didn't know that at seventeen—or even at thirty-four. I've discovered that since. As I've discovered what happened. Twenty years is a long time. The works of Shakespeare, the theory of relativity, a treatment for cancer. What can't be done in twenty years if one puts one's whole mind to work?"

"Not everyone can write like Shakespeare," Michael said.

"But maybe there is a task for everyone," she said. "A unique task. My task was always Mark, protecting him, searching for him. You might be interested in how I proceeded."

"It is getting late," he said.

"Yes," she agreed, "very late. Brian, David, Judy, and one other. Up in the aspen grove. I spoke to the camp manager. He is a rather sour, indifferent man. He remembered drinking, marijuana, loud music. The night Mark disappeared, he heard shouts in the dark, but he was not one 'to borrow trouble.' That was his phrase, 'to borrow trouble.' He just sat in his office and collected the camp rentals, but he was decent enough to store Mark's gear." She reached into her bag and produced a snapshot. "Judy. It took five years to find her. A fortuitous meeting. You know, it was rather sad about her. She died on her honeymoon in Hawaii—one of the very first cases of attacks on tourists. She left the campsite the same night Mark disappeared. I got these from her."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Michael looked at the photos spread on the table: young men with scruffy beards, shorts, hiking boots, and big rucksacks on frames. He remembered the smell of dust and unwashed socks and hemp. "That was David," she remarked.

"Was?"

"It only took me three years to find David. An unattractive person," she added reflectively. "Not the sort of friend Mark had been used to having. He had a motorcycle accident. I read later that they believed he'd been forced off the road by another vehicle."

"How did you find him?" Michael asked.

"Judy's snapshots. She knew his name. I found his address by contacting every motor vehicle department in the country. It took a lot of time. David told me about the party. There had been a fight, he thought, but he had been too drunk to remember. In the morning, he said, Mark was gone. I did not believe him."

"Perhaps you should have believed him," Michael said.

"But that would have raised other questions. Brian, now, took nearly eight years. He'd gone into camping equipment, working at a mail-order company for serious backpackers and hikers. There are a surprising number of mail-order companies. I paid to have a computer age the image from Judy's snapshot. And, of course, travel is my business. I found him in San Diego."

"How did he die?" Michael asked. His voice sounded hollow, unfamiliar.

She looked at him quizzically. "He died in a fall," she said. "Ironic for a climber, but he fell down his office stair."

"Four years ago?" Michael asked.

"Just about. I'd figured maybe another six or seven for you, but there is always serendipity. I saw you sitting here when I least expected to, but of course you'd always been in my mind."

"Of course," Michael said.

"And now we must swap," she said. She laid her handbag on the table. It was the size of a small duffel bag and looked heavy.

"Perhaps you do not really want to," he said.

"Perhaps you are afraid," she said. "Afraid to know."

"None of this has anything to do with me," Michael said. "Now Mark . . ."

"Yes?"

"Mark was afraid."

She waited.

"When it happened—and before—he was afraid. . . ."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Ah," she said, "when what happened?"

"The fight, the accident. It really was an accident; it was no one's fault."

"Up in the aspens," she said. "The night of the party."

"That's right."

"He was afraid. . . ." She stopped and, for the first time, hesitated.

"He was afraid of violence, of unforeseen craziness and confusion."

"Why?" she asked and bit her lip.

"I think that is what you have to swap," Michael said. The lights were coming on. Their golden pinpoints swam in her dark lenses.

"There was no way he could have known," she said softly.

"There are always rumors, hints."

"In a small town, yes, rumors, hints, whispers."

"And when it happened—we were all drunk, you know—when it happened—"

"It? It?" she demanded.

"You've been there," Michael said. "The loneliness of it, the mountains, the sheet of water with the trees quivering and dancing."

"The campsite was sordid."

"In the mountains, you feel small," Michael said. "The wind comes down and blows your soul away."

"But if he was afraid," she said, "he was afraid of himself."

"He had a temper," Michael agreed.

"But nothing like . . ."

"You were going to say?"

"I was going to say, 'Nothing like his father.' Nothing like."

"Yet he worried," Michael said and gripped the edge of the cafe table.

"There was no sign," she said carefully. "There was no sign whatsoever. Schizophrenia develops typically in adolescence. His father—his father was ill from the time he was eleven or twelve."

"A fine father you picked for your son," Michael said.

" 'Picked' is not the right word. But that's another story. We were talking about Mark. He was seventeen when he disappeared. True, the danger years, but there was no sign ever."

"But you must understand," Michael said. "The night awash in beer, rivalry, anger, a sudden violence—"

"And my son was killed," she said in a cold voice.

"There was blood," Michael admitted; he sounded surprised. Yes, there had been blood. "Even in midsummer, it is very cold there in the morning. The light is bluish and the mountains are the color of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lead. You can wake up there and see the very shape of your fears lying in a pool of blood."

"You had killed . . ."

"Let me give you the situation, all right? This guy was in the camp. A stranger passing through. He joined the party that night. He made a pass at Judy, picked a fight. In the morning, he was lying dead in the tent, and the others were gone."

"They would have had ordinary fears," she observed, not unsympathetically.

"They bugged out. Mark had no head for alcohol. By the time he came to, everyone else was gone. He was left to . . . clean up."

"The lake," she suggested.

"The lake is very deep," Michael agreed.

"But not as deep as deception."

"Nor as madness. There was the proof, wasn't there? Proof of what he'd always wanted not to know. Proof of the rumors about crazy Uncle Ben, who'd done something terrible, who was locked up far away, who could never, ever be released."

"You knew all this and yet you left him," she said, her voice dangerous again.

"I'm trying to give you the situation."

"The situation in which he died or in which he 'disappeared'?" She began fumbling in her purse and Michael stood up.

"It was Uncle Ben, wasn't it?" he demanded. "Mark's father was loony Uncle Ben?"

"You see," she said softly, "why it was better not to tell him. You see how much I had to protect him from. You do see that, don't you?"

"Maybe you can see why he had to protect you, too." Michael's whole body pounded with his heart like a great resonating chamber, and a gray morning light suffused the Cafe Visconti, bringing with it the inescapable awkwardness of death. "Why life was impossible for him. How could he have told you, for God's sake!"

"He would have told me in the end," she said calmly. "We were very close. I can't expect you to understand that, but he would never have left me wondering and grieving for twenty years. Never. You had an ordinary life, a conventional home. You have no idea." A little black snub-nosed pistol peeked out over the top of her purse. "You are the very last," she said. "After twenty years." She raised the pistol, and, full of anger and regret and fear, Michael leaped back from the table and broke for the street. His bad leg slowed him, and she saw that the instant before she saw the car. She jumped

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

up and shouted his name, and he glanced back—she would remember that he did glance back—but he had hidden too well, the past was too terrible, and all alternative futures too full of regrets and recriminations. He was still running when he hit the street.

The squeal of brakes and the thump transfixed her heart and turned her nerves to thorns. After a few seconds, she sat back down and laid the child's pistol on the table. When the caribinière arrived, the pistol would be lying there, a harmless toy, and she would be staring toward the dark street behind her tinted glasses. She knew what she would say, something about a present for a friend's child, a misunderstanding, a curiously unstable stranger. She knew she would say those things, though she was not sure why she should bother, for now she was not convinced that she had not, after all, made a terrible mistake.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a ***NEW*** short story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

Legal settings often enter into Michael Gilbert's crime fiction, and it is a profession the author, himself a London solicitor, knows well. Mr. Gilbert was a writer, however, long before he became a lawyer. His first book was completed in 1930 (though not published until much later) and he was one of the founding members of the Crime Writers Association of Britain. His new story for us introduces a senior managing clerk to a firm of London solicitors who seems to know, or be able to figure out, just about anything . . .

THE MATHEMATICS OF MURDER

by MICHAEL GILBERT

Friday, March 18th, was a date Hugo Bracknell was destined to remember. Having missed by two minutes the fast 6:30 train from Liverpool Street to Colchester, he had been forced to take, instead, the 6:55 train on the Braintree line. Anxious study of the timetable had shown him that it would, if it ran to time, reach Witham at 7:55. The snag was that it seemed to be a commuter special, stopping no fewer than nine times before it reached Shenfield; discharging at each of these stops a number of businessmen on the way back to their residences at Chadwell Heath, Gidea Park, Brentwood, and other portions of the suburban sprawl which separated East London from Essex.

After Shenfield it seemed to get a move on, stopping only at Ingatestone, Chelmsford, and Hatfield Peverel before reaching Witham.

It was important that it should run to time. He had been invited to spend the weekend with his aunt. She was a formidable old lady

© 1995 by Michael Gilbert.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

who liked to dine promptly at eight. If the train dallied, or there was any difficulty over picking up a taxi at the station, he was going to keep her from her grub. Unthinkable.

"Then don't think about it," he said. "Either you make it or you don't. So stop worrying."

His thoughts reverted to personal matters; and there was much to think about.

For he had reached a milestone.

After leaving Oxford he had been allowed two years to widen his horizons, to enlarge his knowledge of human nature, to improve his mind; in fact, to enjoy himself, before plunging into the job for which he had been destined from birth.

He was now, and had been for the past ten days, articled to his father, Bob Bracknell, who, with Francis Fearne, constituted the partnership of Fearne and Bracknell, solicitors, in Little Bethel, an odd backwater near the northern end of Tower Bridge, flanked by the offices and warehouse of Ridolfi Brothers on one side and on the other by the Roaring Forties public house. When spoken of in the City—and for a small firm they were spoken of a good deal—they were naturally referred to as Fern and Bracken and strangers sometimes wrote to them under this name. It made no difference. The postmen all knew them.

Ingatestone was briefly stopped at, and left behind them. Three stations to go. Still only 7:45. Relax. Plenty of time.

Fearne and Bracknell was not a big firm. Far from it. But they had that mysterious, indefinable, unchallengeable something. Reputation. People said of them, "Fern and Bracken. Very practical firm, that. Get on with the job, you know. No highfalutin law about them, but sound. Break the law? Of course not. They're not sharp. Just reliable."

Hugo sometimes wondered how much of this reputation stemmed from their senior managing clerk, Horace Piggin. He had met Mr. Piggin on many occasions when visiting the office in his school days and had sat kicking his heels in the waiting room whilst his father dealt with some long-winded client. Mr. Piggin had put himself out to entertain the boy.

He remembered one conversation which had taken place when he was in his last year at Rugby. Mr. Piggin had set the ball rolling by asking him why he had decided to take up law. With a brashness which made him blush when he thought about it, he had said, "Oh, I knew Dad would give me my articles here. And after all, being a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

solicitor isn't difficult. Look at some of the types you see doing it."

Mr. Piggin had agreed with him, gravely.

"Of course, I don't mean you, Piggy. And I don't mean this firm. We're different. I mean the stooges in Lincoln's Inn and Bedford Row who read it all up in books and copy it out."

"That's one fault," Mr. Piggin had agreed, "that you'll not find in this firm. We have hardly a law book in the place."

"But surely, Piggy, you must want to look things up sometimes."

To which Mr. Piggin's memorable reply had been, "If reference to the authorities is required, I trot along to the public library, scribble down the information, and trot back with it."

The thought of Mr. Piggin trotting up Tower Bridge Road with his white hair streaming in the wind had enchanted Hugo.

Chelmsford. A rather larger place. Might that mean a longer stop? But no. Quite a few men got off the now nearly empty train, but there were no passengers waiting to get on. Hatfield Peverel next. No one got off, no one got on. Excellent. Minutes were important.

It occurred to Hugo, who was in the rear coach, that he could save a little time on arrival at Witham if he moved up to a point nearer the centre. There was no difficulty about this. The train consisted of twelve coaches in three blocks of four, and it was possible to move from one block to the other. He passed two men, one at either end of the first carriage. The next two were empty. In the fourth carriage there were a woman with a dog and a man and a girl who were sitting close together and getting on with some very private business. Hugo skirted them and passed through the cubicle which joined the rear four carriages to the central four.

Again an empty carriage. In the next, there was one man slouched in his seat and blocking the door in the centre of the carriage that Hugo had been planning to use. As the train jerked to a stop, the man rolled over and lay across the two seats, staring up at the roof with a puzzled look on his face, and Hugo saw the narrow wound in the back of his neck with the dark blood oozing out of it.

It was instinct that led his hand to the handle of the door. Must have help. Must have air. Get the door open. He stumbled onto the platform and stood holding on desperately to the handle.

The guard shouted, "Stand away," an order which Hugo was unable and unwilling to obey. A louder shout brought out the station master, peremptory and indignant at the sight of a young man, apparently drunk, holding himself up by the door handle.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

By this time the guard had come up. Hugo used his free hand to wave towards the interior of the carriage.

After that, things happened slowly.

First the arrival of a local constable. Then a more senior policeman. Then the business of evacuating the few remaining passengers and shunting the train onto a lay-by. Then the arrival of photographers and a police surgeon and a string of questions which Hugo answered as best he could while trying to control his rebellious stomach. Finally the body was moved and Hugo, his identity established and checked, was at last allowed to take possession of the taxi he had secured and to depart and endeavour to placate his aunt.

He was able in the circumstances to excuse himself from carrying out his projected weekend visit; but he further disrupted his aunt's domestic arrangements by asking to be called at six-thirty. He reached his office at nine o'clock. Fearne and Bracknell—old-fashioned in this as in everything else—worked on Saturday mornings and he arrived, as planned, before either of the partners put in an appearance and made his way straight to the sanctum of their managing clerk. It was Mr. Piggin's advice and support that he wanted.

"So you are the young man," said Mr. Piggin, "described, but tactfully unnamed, whose exploits I have been reading about in the morning papers."

"That's me, Piggy," said Hugo. "And I'll tell you something mighty strange. Nobody I encountered seemed in the least *surprised* at what I told them. Disturbed, excited, even shocked, but not surprised. The official people at Witham were clearly keeping something back, and my aunt, when she'd heard my story, simply closed her mind to it and discussed a problem she was having with the committee of the Women's Institute. But she knew something. I'm sure of it."

Mr. Piggin seemed to be faintly amused. He said, "If you had opened a newspaper three or four months ago you'd have read little or nothing about indiscretions in Whitehall or massacres in Kurdistan. The front page of the paper and other pages as well would have been full of the activities of the creature they christened the Knifeman."

"Are you telling me that yesterday was not the first—"

"It was the sixth known occasion on which he has struck. You have not seen one of today's papers? No. Well, I can assure you that he has regained his position on the front page. Was there nothing in the papers where you were?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The Italian press don't pay much attention to crime in other countries. They've got plenty of their own. Though now that you mention it, I do recall a brief comment about a serial murderer. When did it all start?"

Mr. Piggin had been turning over the pages of his working diaries. He said, "The first one was sixteen months ago, on Tuesday, November tenth. The next, near the beginning of last year, on Friday, February nineteenth. Then on June fifteenth, August thirteenth—which was also a Friday—and on Monday, October eleventh."

"How did they know that these were all the same man?"

"It could not, of course, be *known,*" said Mr. Piggin precisely, "but the evidence that it was so was almost conclusive. His procedure in every case was the same. He waited until he was alone with one other man in the carriage, walked up to him as though he was making for the door, and struck him on the head with a loaded stick or life preserver. As his victim crumpled up he produced his second weapon. This the pathologists, in every case, thought to be a long, slender surgical-type lancet. He drove this upward, through the back of his victim's neck, into his brain, killing him instantly."

Although Mr. Piggin was speaking flatly, as though he was explaining a legal problem, his words recalled the horror of the moment and Hugo found himself shuddering. He said, "The man who does this—he must be mad—but he must also be wholly ordinary in appearance, so as not to excite any suspicion of his intentions."

"Wholly so. And this agrees with the only description we have of him."

"You mean—he was seen—"

"Exercise a little patience," said Mr. Piggin, "and I will endeavour to explain. After five attacks, commuters—as you can imagine—became careful. They took precautions. They travelled, where possible, in parties. Then came this period of more than three months in which nothing happened. Precautions were relaxed—prematurely, you may think—but such is human nature."

Mr. Piggin was now studying his current year's diary.

"On Thursday, January twentieth, a Mr. Osbaldistone was travelling to Bures, where he planned to spend a long weekend with an old friend. This involved changing at Marks Tey. The train was slowing as it approached Kelvedon, the station before Marks Tey, when he suddenly realised that he was alone in the carriage with one other man *and that this man was advancing on him, with his*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

left hand in his overcoat pocket. The consciousness of his peril deprived him, he said, of the power to move or shout. He was mesmerised. Most fortunately, at that moment a young man—the son of the house that he was visiting—came through the connecting vestibule into the carriage. He said, 'Mr. Osbaldistone, isn't it? I guessed it might be you. You're spending the weekend with us.' By this time the other man had opened the carriage door and departed. When Mr. Osbaldistone related his experience, as he did, with some embarrassment, that evening, his hosts impressed on him that it was his duty to communicate with the police. Whether he was right or wrong in his suspicions, it was at least possible that he was the first man to come face-to-face with the killer and live to tell the tale. 'You *must* describe him,' they said."

Because the first victim, a Mr. Mathieson, had worked in Stepney and lived in Romford, both places being in No. 2 Area East, the case had been assigned to the head of that area, Chief Superintendent Oliphant. He had delegated the routine handling of it to Chief Inspector Mayburgh at Cable Street, and it was to Mayburgh that Mr. Osbaldistone duly reported.

Mr. Piggin said, "I gathered from them—Osbaldistone is, by the way, a client of this firm and an old friend of your father's—that it was not a happy experience. I'm sure he did his best, but it amounted to very little. He said, quite reasonably, that he wasn't examining the man's face. His attention was fixed on his left hand, which appeared to be drawing some sort of weapon out of his coat pocket. He couldn't see more than the handle, but yes, it might have been a life preserver, something like that. 'Or the whole thing might have been your imagination,' says Mayburgh. 'Yes, it might have been,' Osbaldistone agreed. 'But I was too worked up to notice precise details.' All this was in answer to a series of bad-tempered questions and grunts. The inspector considered that Mr. Osbaldistone had no right to get worked up. He should have been making a careful inspection of his assailant."

"Mayburgh sounds a bit of a brute," said Hugo.

"He's an old-fashioned rhinoceros who tries to arrive at the truth by butting at it, head first. His second-in-command, Inspector Barley, on the other hand, is what you might call—hum—a scientific policeman."

Hugo gathered from Mr. Piggin's tone that his description of Inspector Barley was not intended to be entirely complimentary.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"In the end," he said, "he got nothing out of Mr. O. except that his presumed attacker looked, in every way, like a normal City worker. Pale face, clean-shaven, indeterminate features, no distinguishing marks. When he said that the man was 'ordinary' he had said it all. His failure on that occasion may account for the inspector's wish to question you."

"For God's sake! Why me? I never even saw the man."

"The working of the inspector's mind is a closed book to me. All I can tell you is that there was a message on our answer-phone when I arrived that he would like to see you at ten o'clock. It's a quarter to ten now. Better not keep the rhinoceros waiting."

When Hugo was ushered into Mayburgh's office he saw a man who could have been nothing but a middle-ranking policeman. One who had started at the bottom and crashed upwards not caring what toes he trod on. The red face, bristling hair, and angry eyes said it all. He barked at Hugo to sit down and opened fire with the observation that Hugo should not have disturbed the body.

"But I had to be certain the man was dead."

"Were you in any doubt about it?"

"Not really, no."

"Then why did you touch him?"

"If I hadn't, he'd have fallen onto the floor. You wouldn't have wanted that, surely."

"It's not what I want, it's what the medical experts want. They can make useful deductions if they find the body *exactly* as it was at the point of death."

This seemed like nonsense to Hugo, but had evidently gained the approval of the young man in glasses who was sitting quietly in the corner. The scientific Inspector Barley?

"Reverting to a point where you *might* be able to help us. It is fairly clear that the attack took place between Ingatestone and Chelmsford and that the assassin left the train at Chelmsford. Did you take any note of the people who got off?"

"I was in the rear carriage at the time, but yes, I did look out. I was anxious about the possibility of the train being held up and I was glad to see that no one was waiting to get on."

"It's the people who got *off* that I'm interested in."

"Well, there were a fair number of them. All men. The usual home-going crowd, I thought."

"Nothing more?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm sorry. No."

"If members of the public kept their eyes open and their wits about them," said Mayburgh, "we might make some progress."

This not being a question, Hugo did not feel called on to answer it, and five minutes later he had been bundled out of the room. As he closed the door, Mayburgh said to Inspector Barley, "What did you make of that? Was he holding out on us?"

"I made nothing of it, because there was nothing to make."

"He's old Bracknell's son. He's just joined the firm. And you know what they're like. Do anything they can to obstruct the police."

"I don't think," said Barley primly, "that we can pin anything onto this young man if he only came back to England a fortnight ago."

"I suppose that's right," said Mayburgh.

It was evident that he was in some awe of his learned junior.

Hugo, meanwhile, had reported the outcome of this unsatisfactory interview to Mr. Piggin.

"The man's a hog," he said. "If he'd been even remotely civil, I might have given him one useful piece of information. I'm fairly certain I recognised the man who was killed."

"Did you indeed?" said Mr. Piggin. "That could be of major importance." He sounded faintly aggrieved. His own sources of information were wide and various. It piqued him that a newcomer should know something that he did not.

"I spent six very enjoyable months at Perugia University and got to know a lot of the students and the younger professors. We used to meet for drinks in the evening and—well, you know how people talk. This particular man—an economics don called Carlo Frossinone—told me—I think he was three parts drunk at the time because the next day he denied that he had ever said it—that he had been approached by the capo of the local mafia to do a job for them and that he'd refused and was now in their black books. He sounded rather proud of this, as though it was a distinction."

Mr. Piggin, who had been listening carefully, had now extracted, from a locked drawer, his private address book. He was thumbing through the section under the letter A.

"Arbuthnot," he said. "That's the man. Colonel Arbuthnot. I'll give him a ring. I'm sure he'll be very interested in what you've told me. It may take a day or two to get hold of him. He's much abroad."

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On the surface, the next few days were uneventful, but there was a disturbing undercurrent to them. The opposition, spearheaded by a claque of members with constituencies in Essex, raised a number of questions in Parliament. The Home Secretary sidestepped them with practised agility, but was not as easy as he managed to appear; and his uneasiness was passed down, in a series of minutes, to the assistant commissioner, and through him to Chief Superintendent Brace, and, finally, to Superintendent Oliphant, who arrived at Cable Street with an ultimatum in his pocket.

"Bring me up to date," he said. "Particularly with regard to this last episode."

"We've got a certain way," said Mayburgh cautiously. "We've circulated a photograph of the victim, which produced a number of identifications, none of them reliable, I'm afraid."

"Had the man no papers on him?"

"Yes. He had an Italian passport. We telexed the details to Interpol, who say that the details in it were false and the whole passport a clever piece of forgery."

"And that's all?" said Oliphant.

"All except an enormous amount of routine work," said Mayburgh rather bitterly. He indicated the six fat folders on a side table, rocks in a torrent of other documents. "The real trouble is that the carriages concerned were of the open type, with thirty-two seats and a gangway down the middle. At the start of a commuter rush, all the seats would be occupied and a number of people standing in the gangway. As people got off, the standers would take over the seats and be replaced by other passengers coming in from even more crowded carriages. Our enquiry produced forty-one people who thought they might have been in the carriage concerned. All of them had to be questioned and their answers recorded."

By the time he had finished this spiel Mayburgh was even redder in the face than usual. Oliphant said, "I'm not suggesting that you haven't done your best with the resources at your disposal. But the official view is that the enquiry needs wider handling. I'm to tell you that unless you can produce concrete results in the next fortnight, the matter will have to be handed over to Central. Meanwhile, I'll alert all the other stations in the area to give you any help you need. So, if you do chance on a line, you can hunt it hard."

When he had departed, it was Inspector Barley who broke the silence. He said, "I feel, sir, that the first thing to do is to subject the case to a complete reassessment. If I might take all the papers

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

home and be allowed a few days off routine duty . . ."

"You'll need a pantechnicon to get that lot home," said Mayburgh sourly. "But go ahead."

Barley was not dismayed. He foresaw days of a kind of work that was much to his taste.

On that same day, Hugo was summoned to the office of Colonel Arbuthnot. It was in a building which overlooked St. James's Park and seemed to be connected with the Ministry of Pensions. The colonel dismissed a pretty, dark-haired girl to whom he was dictating and listened with interest to what Hugo had to tell him. (The girl, who had managed to arrange things so that she could overhear what went on in the colonel's office, also listened with interest and spent some time that evening on the telephone.)

"What you say," said the colonel, "fits in with our information from other sources. You spent some time in Italy, I believe. Then I expect you know how the drug trade is organised there."

"I know what every schoolchild seems to know. That the raw opium comes across from Turkey and is processed into morphia and heroin under the auspices of the mafia, who attend to its export and sale."

"Remarkably well-informed schoolchildren," said the colonel. "The one point they may not have appreciated is that the mafia control the export of the hard stuff to North America and to many European countries—Belgium in particular. But they do *not,* at the moment, handle its export to this country, though they would much like to do so. If the victim of this latest killing was, in fact, Carlo Frossinone—equipped with a forged passport and having overcome his reluctance to help—"

"Or, more likely, been frightened into helping."

"Quite so. Then it follows that the assassin was one of the London-based gangs which *do* handle the import and sale of hard drugs and would do anything to stop the mafia muscling in."

"And the method of killing was designed to suggest that it was the work of the Knifeman?"

"Typical camouflage. And now that we appreciate the position, we can get the Metropolitan Police Drugs Squad and the Customs and Excise Investigators—a very shrewd bunch—onto the killer. Working together they should soon be able to lay hands on him. And I am much obliged to you—"

"Different sort of man to Mayburgh," said Hugo, reporting to Mr. Piggin. "Very pleasant, I thought."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"So I've always found," said Mr. Piggin. "I wound up his father *and* his grandfather. Talking of which, I've got a job for you. An old lady called Mrs. Trumpington—a new client, so handle her carefully—wants to make a will. She is bedridden and cannot come to us, so you are to go round tomorrow and take her instructions. Here's the address. Carlton Mansions—"

As he surveyed Carlton Mansions Hugo surmised, from the appearance of the building, that Mrs. Trumpington must be a lady of means. His surprise was increased by the appearance of the man who opened the door to him and ushered him into a handsomely furnished flat. Had he met him casually he would have taken him for a senior businessman, a man of authority, who would have taken the chair at board meetings. A second equally impressive but younger man was standing with his back to the fire.

Hugo, hearing the door click shut behind him, had the uncomfortable feeling that he had walked into something that it might be difficult to get out of.

Before he could open his mouth, the older man said, in a voice that matched his appearance, "Let us cut all corners. There is no Mrs. Trumper here."

"Trumpington," amended the younger man.

"Trumpington. Yes. She was, in any event, a myth. I am glad your father sent you, because it is specifically with you that we wished to speak. To discuss with you a professor of economics at Perugia University called Carlo Frossinone."

Now how the devil, thought Hugo, would they know anything about *him*. Then he remembered the black-haired girl in Colonel Arbuthnot's office and ceased wondering.

"I understand that you identified the man who was killed on the train as being this professor and have accordingly alerted the security services to the possibility that he was murdered by one of the London drug gangs. Correct?"

Hugo nodded.

"Then let me clarify two points. First, Frossinone is still alive and it can only have been his heated imagination that led him to think that he was threatened by anyone. The man who died was Umberto Bardi, the son of Arturo Bardi and Janina Ridolfi, the youngest sister of Eugenio Ridolfi, whom I expect you know. His office is next door to yours."

"Ridolfi Brothers?"

"Importers and Exporters," said the young man with a half-smile.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"My immediate objective," said the older man, ignoring him, "is to convince you that I am telling you the truth. Have you made the connection?"

"He's ready and waiting." The young man lifted the receiver and handed it to Hugo, who looked at it blankly and then said, "Hullo."

"Ullo, Ugo," said a voice he recognised. "Is that you? What can I do for you this fine morning?"

"I gather that the main thing is to assure me that you are alive and that there is no truth in your statement that you are being threatened by the mafia?"

"Whenever did I say such a thing?" The conversation was now in Italian.

"It was, I recollect, at a party with the Roncoronis."

"Tony's drinks are always stronger than they seem. If I said any such thing I must have been—what is the expression?– talking out of the back of my neck. But what is all this about? Why does it worry you?"

"It only worries me because I thought you were dead."

"If you were back in Perugia I could soon convince you that I was alive."

"I'm sure of it."

The older man, who had been listening on an extension, put out a hand and the young man killed the call.

"I apologise for terminating a reunion with your friend, but there is one further matter and time presses. Not only had we no hand in the killing of Umberto, but he was, in fact, our emissary, doing a job for us in this country. Consequently he was under our protection. Our honour is involved. We shall be taking steps to see that the killer is identified and punished. You follow me?"

Hugo nodded. The atmosphere in the room was so oppressive that he was finding it difficult to speak. Two things were clear. He had made a fool of himself, and he had upset some formidable people.

"You will appreciate that the activities of Colonel Arbuthnot and his friends make it more difficult for us to succeed in our task. So, in return for reassuring you about your friend, Frossinone, might we look to you to assure the colonel that we had no hand in the killing of Umberto and are ourselves seeking his killer?"

Hugo nodded again. All he wanted to do was to get out of the flat. The young man held the door open for him.

By the time he got back to the office he was on balance again. He found Mr. Piggin deep in discussion with Eugenio Ridolfi, the older

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the Ridolfi Brothers. He said, "I asked Mr. Ridolfi to call. As I suspected, he had *not* been shown the photograph of the murdered man—a curious omission on the part of the police. For as soon as he saw it he identified it."

"As his nephew Umberto."

"Precisely. You have just obtained that information from another quarter?"

"Yes."

"From Mrs. Trumpington, no doubt," said Mr. Piggin drily.

Hugo was saved embarrassment by Eugenio, who said, "But certainly it is Umberto. He has dyed his hair and shaved off the handsome side whiskers that he usually wore. Although it is all of twenty years since I last spoke to him, I am in no doubt about it. My wife agrees. You must understand, Mr. Bracknell, that my youngest sister, Janina—let us speak no ill of the dead—was a foolish girl, but not a wicked woman. On the other hand, the man she ran away to marry in Italy *was* a bad man. An associate of criminals. Since we learned of the marriage, I and my brother-in-law, Gino Alvaro, have had nothing to do with the Bardis."

"Is it possible," said Mr. Piggin slowly, "that Umberto was coming to England in an attempt to reconcile the two sides of the family?"

"It is possible. There are people who would like to see the Ridolfi and the Bardi firms working as a unit. But if that was his task, I do not think he would have been able to accomplish it."

"Meanwhile," said Hugo, who had lost his way in the intricacies of the Ridolfi-Bardi clan, "I have to persuade Colonel Arbuthnot to leave it to the mafia to find the killer."

"Nor must we forget," said Mr. Piggin, "that an equally efficient body of people will be engaged on the same task. From what I have learned from my friends in the City, the police have embarked on an entirely new tack—"

The new tack had been the brainchild of Inspector Barley. After three days of study, he had propounded a novel solution to his superior officer.

He said, "The science of psychological fingerprinting is still in its infancy, but if you apply it to the evidence in this case, an outline—you might call it a silhouette of the killer—appears on the screen. It is necessary to accommodate two widely different aspects. On the one hand, the pathologists who studied the body all arrived at the same conclusion. That the killer must have been trained—though not necessarily practised—as a surgeon. He used

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a surgeon's knife with a surgeon's skill. That is the left-hand aspect. The right-hand aspect is the nature of the persons selected—apparently arbitrarily—for slaughter. A bill broker, a stock jobber in a small way of business, an assistant bank manager, and two accountants."

"And one Italian, now identified for us as Umberto Bardi, possibly a criminal, and sent here by the mafia."

"The sixth victim," said Barley severely, "had nothing to do with the other five. His killing in that particular manner was a blind, calculated to deceive us." He looked severely over his glasses at Mayburgh, who said, "Please go on."

"The picture of the killer must combine these two facets. A man trained as a surgeon abandons that profession for reasons we can only speculate on and sets up a business of some sort in the City. His business collapses. His bank manager refuses further credit. A receiver, probably an accountant, is appointed. Either he himself is adjudged bankrupt, or his company is placed in compulsory liquidation. Since the fury inflamed by these happenings was fresh and compelling, I deduce that the business collapse must have occurred shortly before the first of the killings. They were random, in the sense that the victims were not selected personally. They were chosen as types. Just as Jack the Ripper is said to have been revenging himself on all prostitutes, he was taking *his* revenge on the City."

"Could be something in that," said Mayburgh. "But where does it take us?"

"Surely, if you accept my analysis, what we have to do is to study the record of business failures in the twelve months prior to the first killing. If the party involved has a background of surgical training—not a difficult matter to ascertain—then we have our hands on our man."

Several weeks later Mr. Piggin reported to Hugo, with some amusement, "A business friend of mine tells me that Mayburgh is behaving—as he puts it—like a buffalo in a swamp. Raging to get out and attack, but too clogged to move fast in any direction. When he started he can have had no idea of the number of failures of small businesses. More than seven hundred in London alone in the year before the killings started. Nevertheless, he is plodding steadily forward, convinced that he will reach firm ground at last. He may do so. Inspector Barley is a clever young man. He may well, in fact, have arrived at the motive for the killings. But that only takes him halfway to the winning post."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hugo said, "I have been doing some thinking myself and have made some calculations."

"Excellent. Most problems in this life can be solved by mathematics."

"Actually, I was calculating what forces the police would have to deploy to protect the public. If the killings continue to be confined to the seven commuter lines from Liverpool Street—"

"Yes," agreed Mr. Piggin. "I think we can take that as a basis for calculation."

"Then since many of the early evening trains consist of twelve coaches, eighty-four men would be needed. Suppose that this degree of cover is maintained for, let us say, three months. If you ignore the weekends, this would mean sixty-five working days, necessitating a total deployment of five thousand, four hundred and sixty man hours. It's a daunting total, but an effort of this magnitude wouldn't be out of place to trap a serial killer."

Mr. Piggin steepled his fingers and said, "Allow me to correct your factors. In making your calculations you have fallen into the same error as the police and the mafia. You have studied the killer's method, but not his mind. So please think about him. He is a loner, sitting at home, working out his revenge on the City. Someone you might describe—odd though it seems in the circumstances—as an old maid, with an old maid's love of neatness and regularity. Just consider how methodically he has conducted his campaign. One killing on each of the seven available lines. Upminster, Southend, Southminster, Clacton, and Norwich. And—this was the one you were involved in—Braintree. Then we have the aborted attempt on Mr. Osbaldistone—a most important episode. It took place on the Colchester line. *And it was a failure.* A man like ours abhors a failure. It upsets his pattern. Can we doubt that his next, and possibly his final effort will be a repeated attempt on the Colchester line which will round out the pattern?"

"Seems logical," agreed Hugo.

"And since he always selects a latish commuter train I'd lay very heavy odds on the six-ten."

"Well," said Hugo, *"if* you're right, I agree that my first factor should be one, not seven. What about my other factors. Do you question them?"

"In mentioning twelve carriages you overlooked the fact that this man has always seated himself in the centre of the train, clearly in order to be as close as possible to the exit point on the platform

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

when he leaves the train. I agree that he might choose either the fifth or the sixth carriage, so I'm prepared to allow you a second factor of two."

"Thank you," said Hugo. "But even if you're right, two men on your selected train on every working day in the year—it's still quite a substantial total, isn't it?"

"That," said Mr. Piggin, "is where you make your gravest error. I invited you to consider the *mind* of the killer. Lonely, methodical, introverted. Is it not clear that he would be a numerologist?"

"You've lost me."

"A numerologist is a man who places such importance on numbers that he regulates his life by them. There are lucky and unlucky numbers. The unluckiest is, of course, thirteen. Some people carry it forward through the multiplication table and consider twenty-six, thirty-nine, fifty-two, and so on as equally unfortunate. I once had a client who believed so firmly in this that when I presented him with a bill for thirty-nine pounds he came round in person to protest. I could only pacify him by increasing it to forty pounds. On the other hand, there are lucky numbers. They are based on the number seven and all its multiples up to sixty-three, which was, historically, deemed to be the grand climacteric. A particularly lucky number in this series was twenty-one, additionally important as being the age of majority. The law on that point may have changed, but the number has never lost its supreme power. And clearly it rules this killer absolutely."

"How do you mean, Piggy?"

"You haven't seen it? Look at the dates he selected. November tenth, February nineteenth, June fifteenth, August thirteenth, October eleventh. Write them numerically: 10/11, 19/2, 15/6, 13/8, and 11/10. You see? The total, in every case, is twenty-one. The Osbaldistone attempt on January twentieth fits in also. One or two might have been a coincidence. Certainly not six. Quite impossible."

Hugo, who was feeling breathless, said, "Good God!" and "You don't really think." And then, "And what about the one I was involved in. That was March eighteenth—18/3."

"Quite so," said Mr. Piggin. "And it is significant in two ways. First, it means *that it was unquestionably one of the sequence we have been discussing*. I refuse to believe that chance could have dictated this particular date. Second, it means that your mafia acquaintances are quite wrong in supposing that the killing was anything to do with Umberto's mission for them in this country. He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

simply happened to offer an ideal chance for the Knifeman, whose opportunities had been much diminished as men tended to travel in groups. But Umberto, who had been living in Italy, would have known nothing about all this. Indeed, if the mafia had thought about it, they must have realised that their rivals in the drug trade would have had no time to organise the attack. Umberto had arrived from Italy, unannounced, that same day. No, no. It is quite clear that the man the mafia should be pursuing is not a professional rival but the Knifeman himself."

Hugo had started scribbling dates on a piece of paper. He said, "April seventeenth adds up to twenty-one. Why did nothing happen on that day?"

"Because it happens to have been a Sunday."

"Oh. So it was. Well then, look here—"

"Yes?"

"The next one is May sixteenth."

"Yes."

"Which is next Monday."

"Quite so."

"And do you really think—"

"Either you accept the laws of mathematics or you reject them."

"Then shouldn't we tell someone."

"Can you imagine explaining it to Chief Inspector Mayburgh?"

"Perhaps not," said Hugo. "But we must do *something*."

"Certainly. Next Monday we will catch the six-ten train to Colchester. I will occupy a seat in carriage number five. You will occupy one in carriage number six."

Hugo said, "Oh!" rather feebly. And then, "I suppose it would be the logical way of doing it."

His carriage, which had been crammed to start with, was emptying rapidly. Hugo's mouth was dry and he had an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his stomach. Although he kept telling himself that Mr. Piggin's theory was moonshine, one corner of his mind concentrated obstinately on the idea of a knife: long, thin, sharp-edged, with a needle point.

Shenfield, Ingatestone.

He stole another look at the man occupying the far corner seat. A very ordinary man. The only thing that had attracted Hugo's attention was his immobility. His evening paper was on the seat

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

beside him, but he was making no attempt to read it. Nothing suspicious in that, surely?

At Chelmsford, most of the other passengers got out. Apart from this character in the corner, there was now only one other occupant of the carriage, a stout, red-faced man who was sitting in the seat beside the carriage door. The train lurched forward again. The next stop would be Hatfield Peverel and it was clear that both men were preparing to get out. The stout man had stowed his paper away into his briefcase. The suspicious character had got to his feet and was moving across. He was carrying no luggage and seemed to be feeling for something in the inside of his coat. For God's sake, thought Hugo, surely he daren't attempt anything with me watching him.

As the train stopped, the stout man got up and politely opened the carriage door. The suspect pulled out the season ticket he had been feeling for and both men descended onto the platform. They were laughing at something.

Hugo let out all the breath he had been holding. Then he sat back in his seat as his heart resumed its normal rhythm. Of course nothing had happened. Mr. Piggin had been talking nonsense. He got up, strolled down the now empty carriage, and peered into the next one.

What he saw stopped him in his tracks.

Mr. Piggin, apparently deep in the study of his evening paper, was occupying the seat next to the door. There was only one other man in the carriage, and as the train slowed he got up and started to move across. It was clear that his route to the door was going to take him very close to Mr. Piggin, who looked up with a bland smile as he approached.

It was the sort of smile, thought Hugo, that might have illuminated the face of Pythagoras when, at long last, he saw the proof of something he had previously only suspected. He croaked out, "Why, hullo, Mr. Piggin. I didn't expect to see you on this train."

Hardly pausing in his stride, the unknown man thrust the door open, climbed down onto the platform, and slammed the door shut behind him, without looking round.

Hugo said, "Was that—?"

"Certainly that was our man. One hand was actually on the handle of the life preserver he intended to use. He had it half out of his pocket. I must confess that I was glad when you intervened. If I may say so,"—Mr. Piggin sounded mildly reproachful—"I thought you left it rather late."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm sorry, Piggy. It was just that, at the last moment, I couldn't believe it was really going to happen. What do we do now?"

"We alight at the next station and take the train back to London. I've no doubt that our man will be doing the same. He would only have to cross the footbridge and keep out of sight until the train arrived. There's an up train reaches Kelvedon at seven-fifteen. We should be in plenty of time to transfer to it. On this occasion, we'll spread our net a little wider. You get into the front carriage. I'll travel in the rear one. We'll get off when he does, but we can't plan further ahead until we see what he does. Fortunately, I have used this line so frequently that I know most of the station staffs well."

Hugo's confidence in Mr. Piggin was now so complete that it was no surprise to him when he saw their man come out of the little hutchlike waiting room at Witham and climb onto the train. It would have surprised him if he hadn't.

It was a stopping train. And as station succeeded station without their man making a move, Hugo began to worry. Might he be going all the way back to Liverpool Street? Which could be awkward. But no. It was at Manor Park, three stations from the terminus, that they saw him emerge and watched him disappear into the ticket office. Mr. Piggin seemed to be in no hurry to follow. He was deep in conversation with the ticket collector. As Hugo came up, he heard, "That man who went out just now? That's Mr. Appleyard. Lives along South Park Road. If you hurried you could catch him."

Mr. Piggin thanked him and as soon as they were clear of the station, said, "They sell a very nice line of beer at the Green Man. I think this calls for a drink, don't you?"

"Seconded and carried unanimously," said Hugo fervently.

It was when they were seated, with pint glasses in front of them, that Hugo started to see rocks ahead. He said, "You've done a marvellous job, Piggy. An absolutely incredible job, and we now *know* who the killer is. But tell me this. How are we going to prove it? Think what a meal you'll be for defending counsel. *'How* did you identify the accused, Mr. Piggin? By mathematics? Really, sir, if the matter was not so serious, I'd imagine you were joking—' "

Mr. Piggin took a long pull at his beer, replaced the half-empty glass on the table, and said, "It had not been my intention to trouble our overworked police force or our notoriously inefficient prosecution service with this matter."

"Then what—?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You have some means, I imagine, of getting in touch with your mafia acquaintances. I think, don't you, that once they understood that it was Mr. Appleyard who killed their protégé, they would take appropriate steps."

A week later the householder at Number Twenty-seven South Park Road telephoned the police to say that a dangerous escape of gas seemed to be taking place at Number Twenty-five and no one seemed to be doing anything about it.

This brought Chief Inspector Mayburgh onto the scene. Normally he would not have become involved in such a routine matter, but he had received a telephone call earlier that morning from a man who had refused to give his name but had said, "If you want the Knifeman, go to Twenty-five South Park Road. Don't forget to look in the desk."

The coincidence of the address had stirred him into action. He brought Inspector Barley with him.

They found that the fire brigade, equipped with respirators, had entered the house, turned off the gas, which was pouring into the kitchen, and succeeded in clearing the atmosphere. They had not disturbed the body of the householder, a Mr. Appleyard, which had been found on the floor beside the kitchen table, on which two pillows and a rug had been placed.

"Made himself comfortable, didn't he?" said Mayburgh.

"It's often the way they go," said the police surgeon. "When he finally lost consciousness he must have rolled off the table onto the floor. That would account, no doubt, for the bruising on the back of his head."

When Mayburgh examined the desk, he was delighted to find in one of the drawers a surgical knife, a homemade life preserver, and Mr. Appleyard's private diary, which contained a full account of the difficulties and final collapse of the company selling medical equipment which he had founded when he left his post as assistant in the surgical wing at St. Christopher's Hospital.

Chief Inspector Mayburgh was not a man who threw compliments around, but he felt that something special was called for on this occasion.

He said to Inspector Barley, "I regard this as a triumph for the theory of psychological fingerprinting. Clearly what happened was that this man heard of our enquiries, felt the net closing round him, and took this way out. You must write it up for the *Police Gazette*."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The inspector smiled modestly and said that he would see what he could do.

Mr. Piggin said nothing. He was too busy. Fearne and Bracknell had been instructed by one of their City clients in a particularly unpleasant case of blackmail. ●

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

I	T	W	A	S	■	S	A	I	D	■	S	A	M	S
R	H	O	N	E	■	H	E	R	A	■	T	R	E	T
A	O	R	T	A	■	A	R	A	N	■	M	I	T	E
Q	U	E	E	N	S	L	A	N	D	■	A	A	R	E
■	■	■	■	■	C	E	L	T	■	E	A	R	N	E	D
C	L	O	N	E	D	■	E	A	R	L	Y	■	■	■	■
L	O	W	E	■	E	S	S	E	■	A	M	E	E	R
A	L	L	W	O	R	K	■	O	B	S	E	R	V	E
M	A	S	O	N	■	I	O	N	E	■	A	L	E	E
■	■	■	R	E	A	M	S	■	L	A	D	E	R	S
B	E	R	L	I	N	■	I	D	O	L	■	■	■	■	■
A	L	O	E	■	S	H	R	E	W	S	B	U	R	Y
C	O	L	A	■	W	A	I	N	■	O	A	S	I	S
O	P	E	N	■	E	R	A	S	■	P	R	A	T	E
N	E	S	S	■	R	E	N	E	■	S	A	F	E	R

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEXT ISSUE...

11 stories—including

One Night at Dolores Park by BILL PRONZINI
The Man Who Rowed for the Shore by CATHERINE AIRD
The Slave Trade by ROBERT BARNARD
The Darings of the Red Rose by MARGERY ALLINGHAM

JANET HUTCHINGS ..... *Editor*
DOROTHY CUMMINGS ..... *Editorial Assistant*
JEAN TRAINA ..... *Design Director*
TERRI CZECZKO ..... *Art Director*
ANTHONY BARI ..... *Junior Designer*
MARILYN ROBERTS ..... *Director of Production*
CAROLE DIXON ..... *Production Manager*
CYNTHIA MANSON ..... *Director of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights*
CONSTANCE SCARBOROUGH ..... *Contracts Manager*
BARBARA PARROTT ..... *Director of Newsstand Circulation*
BRUCE SCHWARTZ ..... *Director of Circulation Subscription Sales*
DENNIS JONES ..... *Operations Manager Subscription Sales*
LESLIE GUARNIERI ..... *Renewal & Billing Manager Subscription Sales*
FRED SABLOFF ..... *Associate Publisher*
JUDY DORMAN ..... *Advertising Sales Manager*

ADVERTISING OFFICES

NEW YORK
(212) 782-8562

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
Dresner Direct, Inc., N.Y., N.Y. (212) 889-1078

CHRISTOPH HAAS-HEYE
President and Publisher
Dell Magazines

JACK HOEFT
President and CEO
Bantam Doubleday Dell

* * *

ELLERY QUEEN
Editor-in-Chief
(1941–1982)

ELEANOR SULLIVAN
Editor-in-Chief
(1982–1991)

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. Vol. 105, Nos. 3 & 4, Whole Nos. 640 & 641, March 1995. Published every 28 days which includes special issues in March and October by Dell Magazines, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, at $2.50 a copy in the U.S.A., $3.25 in Canada. 1 year subscription $34.97 in U.S.A. and possessions, $44.97 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Call 800-333-3053 with questions about your subscription. Editorial and Executive Offices, 1540 Broadway, N.Y., N.Y. 10036. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 5127, Harlan, IA 51593-5127. Second-class postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260649.

© 1995 Dell Magazines, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright Convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Printed in U.S.A. Submission must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.

POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 5127, Harlan, IA 51593-5127. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. ISSN: 1054-8122. Dell GST: R123054108. For back issues, send $3.50 to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462. PRINTED IN U.S.A.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

EQ MARCH '95

QUEEN/HITCHCOCK combination CLASSIFIED AD rate is $4.80 per word—payable in advance ($72.00 minimum). Capitalized words 60¢ per word additional. To be included in the next issue please send order and remittance to Judy Dorman, DELL MAGAZINES, 1540 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036.

ADDITIONAL INCOME

GET PAID FOR READING BOOKS! UP TO $100 per book. Send name, address to Calco Publishing, (DeptC-627), 500 South Broad, Meriden, CT 06450.

AUTHORS' SERVICES

NEW AUTHORS, publish your work. All subjects considered, Academic, Religion, Poetry, Children's Fiction, Non-Fiction, Biography. Authors worldwide invited, write or send your *manuscript*, MINERVA PRESS, 2, Old Brompton Road, London, SW7, 3DQ, England.

BOOKS & PERIODICALS

100,000 science fiction and mystery paperback, magazines, hardcovers. Free catalogs! Pandora's, Box Z-54, Neche, ND 58265-0133.

MYSTERY ADDICTS! Free catalogue! New and Recycled Detective Fiction. Grave Matters, Box 32192-C, Cincinnati, OH 45232, 513-242-7527.

FREE used mysteries catalog. No Tie Required, PO Box 66011, West Des Moines, IA 50265 515-221-2581.

FREE catalogs. Collectible and used mystery fiction. Murder Is Served, 5273 Bittersweet Drive, Dayton, OH 45429, 513-438-0211.

FREE catalog of used and collectible detective fiction. Dunn and Powell Books, Dept, DP, The Hideaway, Bar Harbor, Maine 04609.

FREE CATALOGS, Mystery, Hardcover, Vintage paperbacks, Ed McDonald's Mostly Mystery, PO Box 971, Stratford, CT 06497.

MAIGRET and Simenon novels. Buy, Sell, Trade. Write Maigret, PO Box 550, Lewiston, NY 14092.

BOOKS & PERIODICALS—Cont'd

FREE catalogue. Large stock since 1953. Aardvarks mysteries, 1013 San Domingo Road, Orlando, FL 32808.

EDUCATION & INSTRUCTION

WITCHCRAFT Occult Miracle Power Secrets. Gavin and Yvonne Frost. Now accepting students. 1502-AN, New Bern, NC 28563.

MYSTERY CRUISE

MYSTERY CRUISE '95

7TH ANNUAL MYSTERY CRUISE, March 31, 1995. Treat yourself to seven days of mystery, and fun, aboard NCL's M.V. Starward sailing to TORTOLA, ST. KITTS, BARBADOS, ST. LUCIA, ST. BARTS, ST. JOHN & ST.THOMAS. Featuring a special onboard mystery created for Mystery Cruise participants - Special guest mystery authors AARON AND CHARLOTTE ELKINS - Mystery games and contests- Private parties - Prizes - Surprises. Don't delay, call now, space is limited. For information, call Omni Group Cruises, 1-800 876-6664.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

OF INTEREST TO ALL

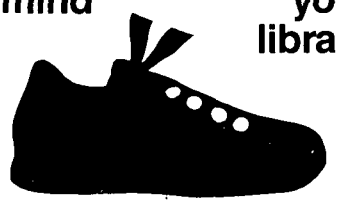
QUESTIONS about life? Relationships! Career! Money! Love! Talk to phychic live!!! 1-900-820-3055 Ext 5696, $3.99 per min. Must be 18 yrs. Procall Co. (602) 954-7420.

PERSONAL

BEAUTIFUL BRITISH LADIES & ELIGIBLE BRITISH GENTLEMEN seek friendship, romance & marriage with Americans! All ages! Free details: ENGLISH ROSE INTRODUCTION AGENCY (Dept. AHEQ), 24, Cecil Square, Margate, Kent CT9 1BA, ENGLAND. TEL/FAX: 01144-843-290735.

Nationwide introductions! Refined singles 18-80. Also, Japanese, Asian, European! Identify, Box 315-DT, Royal Oak, Michigan 48068.

jog your mind
run to your library



American Library Association

In The Future...

YOUR
Classified/Display
AD
CAN BE
PLACED HERE

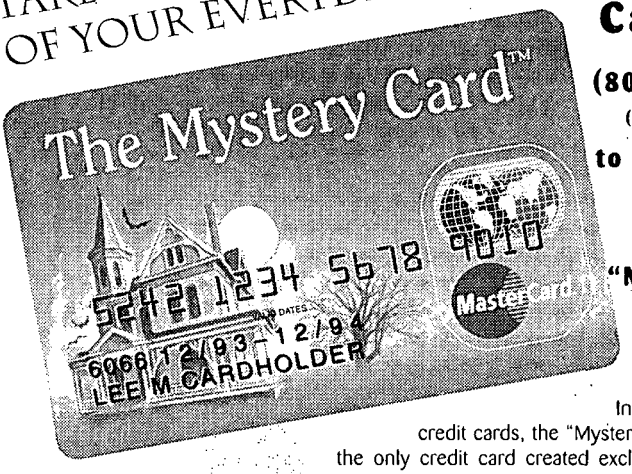
For details
MY CLASSIFIED
1540 Broadway
New York, N.Y. 10036
(212) 782-8549

YOU'LL MAKE MONEY

SAVE MONEY TOO
BY READING AND ANSWERING
THESE CLASSIFIED ADS

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TAKE THE MYSTERY OUT OF YOUR EVERYDAY PURCHASES!



Call now

(800) 777-9901

(ask for Mystery!)

to apply for the intriguing "Mystery Card" MasterCard®

- **No Annual Fee!***
- **Low 12.9% APR!***
- **Travel Accident Insurance at no extra cost!**
- **Extended Warranty & Purchase Protection for High Line Cards!**
- **Secured Card available!**
- **Worldwide acceptance at over 10.6 million locations!**

*For the first year, except for Secured Cards. After the first year, the variable rate as of April 1, 1994, would be 14.9% for a High Line Card and 15.9% for a Standard Card. The APR for cash advances would be 19.8%. The annual fee would be $40 for a High Line Card and $20 for a Standard Card. The transaction fee for a cash advance is 2% of the advance with a minimum of $2 and a maximum of $10.

In a world of mundane credit cards, the "Mystery Card" MasterCard is the only credit card created exclusively for readers of mystery. The unique gothic design identifies your interest in finding clues and solving mysteries.

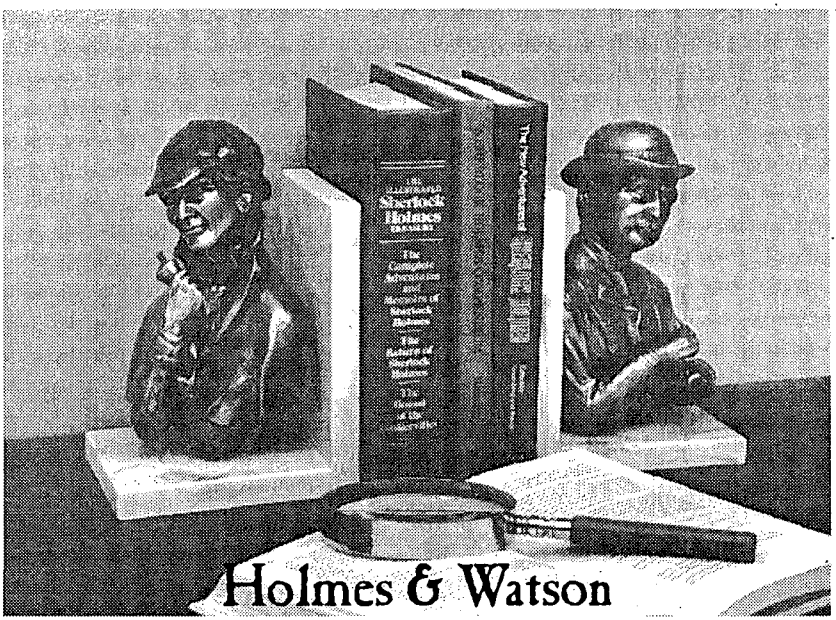
It's no mystery...if you qualify for a "High Line" Mystery Card MasterCard, your credit line will be $5,000 or more, and you will enjoy the benefits of outstanding services and savings–including purchase protection for 90 days against theft or damage as well as extended manufacturer's original U.S. warranty for up to one additional year. Mystery Card "Standard" MasterCards, with lower limits, have the same first year 12.9% APR as "High Line" MasterCards.

Mystery Card "Secured" MasterCards are available if you are establishing new or renewed credit.

There is no interest on your purchases when your balance is paid by the payment due date. Cash Advances are available at more than 200,000 banks around the world, at more than 100,000 cash machines, and with checks you can write yourself. You will have travel accident insurance at no extra cost and discounts of up to 10% on Hertz rental cars. Personal customer service is toll-free 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Your clue for hassle-free purchasing power... the "Mystery Card" MasterCard! Call 1-800-777-9901 and ask for Mystery.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



The Perfect End

The new sculpture release of Holmes & Watson Book Ends by renowned portrait sculptor Edward J. Rohn are the perfect end for your book collection. Mr. Rohn has portrayed Holmes in his classic pensive pose with "the chronicler", Watson, making notes "on the cuff". These 9" high portraits are cast in cultured marble, individually hand-finished in bronze, and mounted on cultured marble bases with high-quality billiard cloth bottoms to prevent scratching or scuffing. Each weighs 5 pounds, heavy enough to support even the biggest volume in your collection.

Reserve your pair today with a deposit of only $29.00 and we'll bill the balance of $156.00 plus $9.50 shipping and handling prior to shipment. Send the full amount, $185.00 per pair, and we'll ship free. Due to the extensive hand-crafting and finishing, please allow 8 to 10 weeks minimum for shipment.

Please reserve _____ pairs of the Holmes & Watson Book Ends ($29.00 per pair deposit or $185.00 per pair full payment).
Enclosed is my check/money order in the amount of $_____. Money Back Guarantee.

Name _____ Signature _____

Address (No P.O. Boxes Please) _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Rohn Studio, 428 Schiller, Elmhurst, Illinois 60126

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

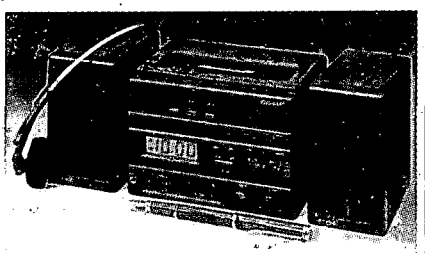
MAIL ORDER MALL

THE MAGICAL SPARE BED

It's almost like pulling an extra bed out of a hat. Unlike most spare beds that gobble up storage space and are unwieldy to move, this one rolls down to fit a 36" long, 3" diameter canvas case, to stash in a closet corner, car trunk, camper, anywhere. Yet it unrolls in minutes to a full-size 27"x73" bed that will even accommodate 6-footers. The secret's in the inventive construction: a cotton canvas sling is supported on laminated steel legs for cushioning and stability on rough ground. Toss the carrying strap over your shoulder and go—camping, beach, poolside, the 10" legs keeps it off damp ground and sand. This bed is indispensable at home, country home, dorm—even for kids in motel rooms. $61.98 ($12.95) #A1931.

MICRO STEREO- MAXIMUM SOUND

The Electrobrand micro stereo system with stereo cassette player, AM/FM radio and LCD clock also includes powerful, full fidelity speakers that measure 2 ½ x 4 ½ x 4 ¼ inches; a highly functional receiver just 5 ⅞ x 2 ⅜ x 4 ¼ inches in size and a cassette player that measures only 5 ⅞ x 1 ½ x 4 ¼ inches! This extraordinary system will fit virtually anywhere imaginable, you name it, a small space on your bookshelf, desk, RV, boat, bedside, poolside! The push button controls, wake-to-alarm, snooze bar, adaptor, stereo headphones and a rich woodgrain finish make this complete micro stereo system a bargain you just can't resist! AA batteries (not included). $49.98 ($5.95) #A2068.



TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **Mail Order Mall,** Dept. 035EL; P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-722-9999**. NJ residents add 6% sales tax. We honor MasterCard/Visa. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

Magalog Marketing Group Inc.© 1994 Advertisement 1905 Swarthmore Avenue, Lakewood, NJ, 08701

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED